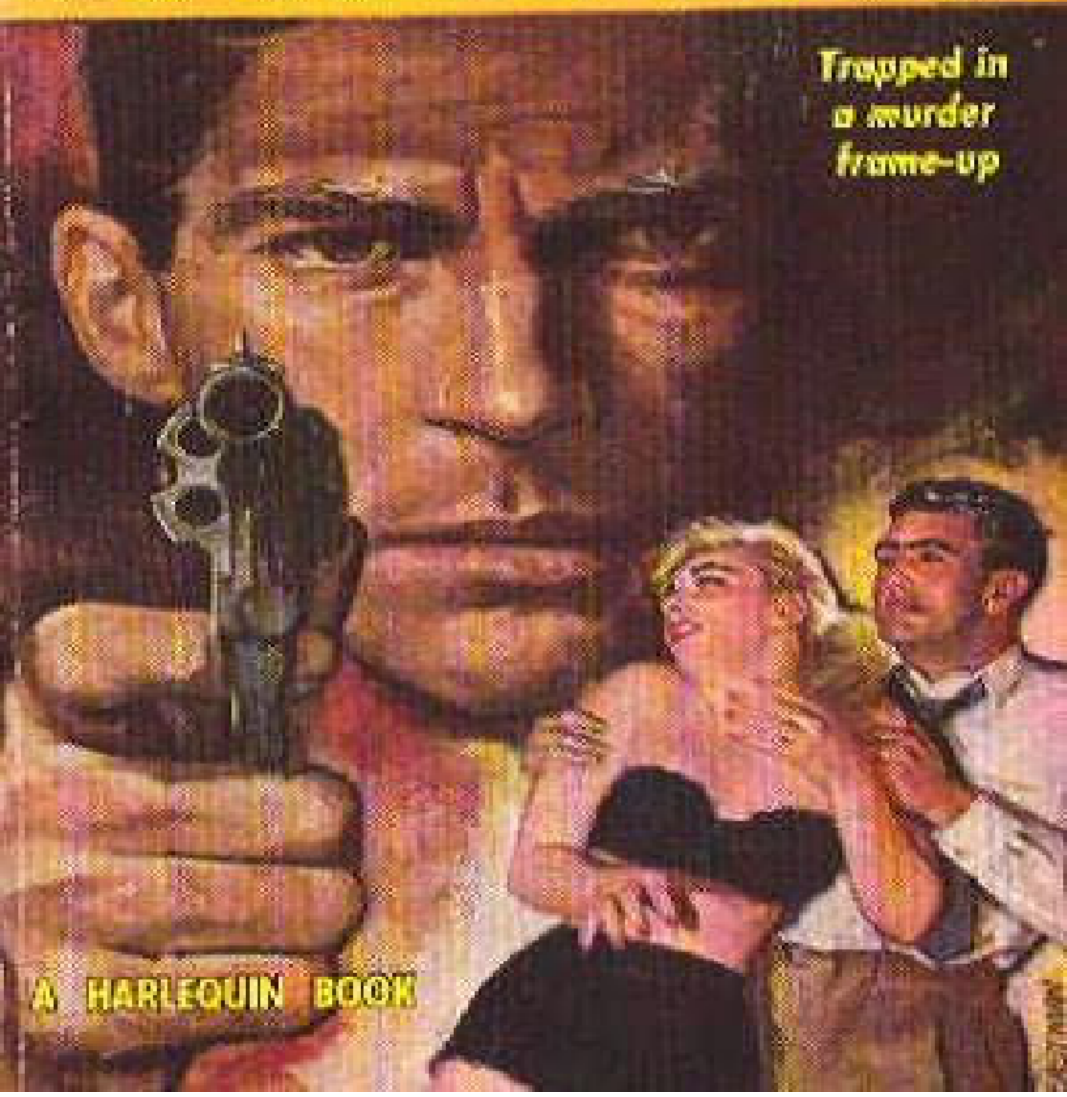
413 James Hadley Chase 35c

I'LL GET YOU FOR THIS



I'LL GET YOU FOR THIS
JAMES HADLEY CHASE
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Chapter One
FALL GUY

1

THEY had told me that Paradise Palms was a pretty nice spot, but when I saw it, I was knocked for a loop. It was so good I stopped the Buick to gape at it.

The town was built along the semi-circular bay with its miles of golden sand, palm trees and green ocean. The buildings were compact, red roofed with white walls. Tree-lined avenues led into the town from four directions. Flower-beds decorated the sidewalks. Every tropical flower, tree and plant grew in the streets, and the effect was like a dream in Technicolor. The colours hurt my eyes.

After I'd stared at the flowers, I concentrated on the women, driving in big luxury cars or walking along the sidewalks, or even riding bicycles. It was as good as an Earl Carrol show. There wasn't a woman who hadn't stripped down to the bare essentials. My eyes hadn't overeaten themselves like this in years.

As a curtain-raiser for a vacation, it couldn't have been better. And that's what I was on: a vacation. Four months of working the gambling joints in New York had been a pretty hard grind. When I had acquired a roll of not less than twenty grand I had promised myself a real vacation with all the trimmings. By the time I'd saved fifteen, I nearly threw it up, but, somehow, I kept on, in spite of the bags under my eyes, a couple of bullet wounds and a flock of opposition. You don't win twenty grand without making enemies. I made plenty. It got so bad that I was driving around in an armoured car, putting newspapers on the floor around my bed so no one could get at me without waking me, and toting a gun, even in my bath.

I got my roll and I got a reputation. They said I was the fastest gun-thrower in the country. Maybe I was, but I didn't tell anyone that I practised two hours a day, wet or shine. I killed guys, but it wasn't murder. Even the cops said so, and they should know. Every time I killed a guy I made sure he had the drop on me first, and I had witnesses to prove it. I'd worked it so I could pull a gun and shoot before the other guy could squeeze his trigger. That wanted a lot of doing; it meant hard work, but I stuck at it, and it paid dividends. I was never even arrested.

I had acquired my roll, bought the Buick, and here I was, ready for a vacation in Paradise Palms.

While I was gaping at the women, a traffic cop came over. He actually saluted me.

"You can't park here, sir," he said, resting his foot on my running board.

Imagine: a cop calling me "sir".

"I've just blown in," I said, starting my engine. "It's taken my breath away. Boy! This certainly looks good."

The cop grinned. "It gets you, don't it?" he said. "I gaped plenty when I first arrived."

"It sure does," I said. "Look at those dames. They make me feel I have X-ray eyes, and that's something I've always wanted. I'm scared to look away in case I miss something."

"You should see 'em on the beach," the cop said wistfully. "They're no more self-conscious than a tree."

'That's the way I like my women."

"So do I," the cop said, shaking his head, "but it doesn't add up to anything here, except a strained eyesight' and a stiff neck."

"You mean they're hard to make?"

He whistled. "Takes a piano mover to throw 'em over."

"I'm good at moving pianos," I said, and asked him where I could find Palm Beach Hotel.

"Some joint," he said, sighing. "You'll like it there; even the food's good," and he gave me directions.

I reached the hotel in two or three minutes, and the reception I got would have satisfied Rockefeller himself. A flock of bellhops grabbed my luggage, somebody drove the Buick to the hotel garage, and a couple of pixies, dolled up in blue and gold fancy dress, would have carried me up the steps if I'd let them, and if they'd had the strength.

The reception clerk did everything except go down on his hands and knees and knock his head on the floor.

"We're delighted to have you here, Mr. Cain," he said, handing me the register and a pen. "Your rooms are ready, and if you're not satisfied with the view you have only to let me know."

I wasn't used to this line of treacle, but I made out that I was. I told him I was pretty fussy about views, and the one he'd arranged for me had better be good.

It was good. I had a private balcony, a sitting-room and a bedroom with a bathroom attached that only Cecil B. de Mille could have designed.

I went out on the balcony and looked across the beach, the palms and the ocean. It was terrific. To my left, I could look into some of the other rooms of the hotel. The first one I looked into was as good as a peep-show you sometimes find in a back street in New York; only it had more class. The dame was an eye-stopper. She was wearing a couple of dumb-bells in either hand. Maybe she called it exercising in the nude. I caught her eye. Before she ducked out of sight, her smile said: "We could have fun together, big boy."

I told the reception clerk who'd come up with me that the view was swell.

When he had gone, I went back onto the balcony, hoping to see some more of the dumb-bells, but I'd seen all there was to see.

I hadn't been out on the balcony more than three minutes before the telephone rang. I answered it, thinking maybe it was a wrong number.

"Mr. Cain?"

I said as far as I knew it was.

"Welcome to Paradise Palms," went on the voice: a rich, fruity baritone with a dago accent. "This is Speratza talking. I manage the Casino Club. I hope you'll come over. We've heard about you."

"You have?" I said, pleased. "That's swell. Sure, I'd like to come over. I'm on vacation, but I still gamble."

"We have a line place here, Mr. Cain," he said, goodwill oozing from every pore. "You'll like it. How about tonight? Can you make it?"

"Sure. I'll be over."

"Ask for me: Don Speratza. I'll see you're fixed good. You got a girl?"

"Not right now, but there seem to be plenty kicking around." "But not all of them are obliging, Mr. Cain," he said, laughing. "I'll fix you with one who knows her way around. We want you to have a good time

while you're with us. We don't often have such a celebrity. You leave the girl to me. You won't be disappointed."

I said it was pretty nice of him and hung up.

About ten minutes later the telephone rang again. This time it was a bass voice that said it belonged to Ed. Killeano. I didn't know any Ed. Killeano, but I said I was glad he had called.

"I heard you were in town, Cain," the voice said. "I want you to know we're glad to have you here. Anything I can do to make your stay a pleasant one be sure to let me know. The hotel will tell you where you can find me. Have a good time," and before I could think of anything to say he rang off.

I was human enough to call the desk and ask who Ed. Killeano was. They told me in a hushed voice that he was the City Administrator. They made it sound like he was Joe Stalin.

I thanked them and went back to the balcony.

The sun shone on the golden beach, the ocean sparkled, and the palms nodded their heads in the lazy breeze. Paradise Palms still looked wonderful, but I was beginning to wonder if it was too good to be true.

I had a hunch that something was cooking.

2

I drove down Ocean Drive. The traffic was heavy, and I moved slowly, the damp, salt smell of the sea in my nose, the pounding of the surf in my ears.

It was the kind of night you read about in books. The stars looked like diamond dust on blue velvet.

Two blocks further up I came upon a lighted drive that led to a big building with one of those fancy fronts made of marble or glass or porcelain or something—a kind of powder blue with "Casino" in sizable letters on a ledge at the top of the first floor. The whole building was lit by indirect lighting, and the over-all effect was pretty nice.

The Negro doorman's brass buttons gleamed in the light. He pulled open the door of the Buick, and another Negro stepped forward to drive the car to the garage.

I walked in under the blue canopy and found myself in a corridor fined on both sides with discreet private dining-rooms with numbers on the doors. At the other end of the corridor was an arch and beside it was the booth occupied by a blonde hat-check girl.

"Check, Mister?" she asked nasally.

I wolfed her over. She was wearing a tight little bodice in sky blue satin, open all the way down the front and laced together loosely by black silk cords. Apparently she had nothing on under the bodice. It was one of those outfits that keeps everyone warm except the wearer.

I gave her my hat and a friendly leer.

"That's a nice view you have there," I said courteously.

"The night some guy doesn't make that crack I'll drop down dead," she returned, sighing. "It's part of my job to have a nice view."

I paused to light a cigarette. "A view to what?" I asked.

"No dice. That gag's transparent with age."

"Sorry," I said. "I don't often come to a joint like this. I'm a home lover, and one gets kind of old-fashioned in fife's little backstreams."

She looked me over and decided I was harmless. "That's all right by me," she said, smiling. "I like variety. The trouble here is that all men seem cast in the same mould."

"But surely some are more mouldy than others?" I said.

She giggled. Three men came up to check their hats, so I drifted on through the arch into as sweet a night club layout as you would wish to see, done in pastel shades with indirect lighting and with a beautiful crescent-shaped bar on one side. It was a terrific room with a place for an orchestra and small dance floor made of some composition that looked like black glass. Out of the floor, out of blue and chromium boxes, grew banana trees with broad green leaves and clusters of green bananas. Vines clung to the trunks of the trees, bearing fragile blossoms; pink, orange, bronze and henna. Half the room had no roof and overhead were stars.

A fat bird came up to me and gave me the teeth, which was supposed to mean he was glad to see me. He wore patent-leather shoes, dark trousers, a Dubonnet-red cummerbund and a white drill coat tailored like a mess jacket.

"Give me Speratza," I said.

He gave me the rest of the teeth, including a couple of gold inlays.

"I am the manager, please," he said. "Is there something I can do?"

'Yeah," I said. "Drum up Speratza. Tell him Chester Cain has blown in."

If I'd said I was King George VIth I couldn't have got a faster double-take.

"A thousand apologies for not recognizing you, Mr. Cain," he said, bowing in half. "Senor Speratza will be enchanted. I will have him informed you have arrived." He swung round and signalled frantically to a dressed-up dummy who was posed by the bar. The dummy shot away like he had a rocket in his pants. It was a pre-arranged, regal routine, and it impressed me as it was meant to impress me.

"Nice place you have here," I said for something to say. I was only giving him half my attention. The other half was reeling under the impact of the women in the joint. They were something to see. Even a horse would look over his shoulder at them. A dark woman in a red dress drifted past as I was about to compliment him further. She stopped me in mid-stride. She had the most provocative walk I had

ever seen. Her hips were sheathed in this red silk, pulled so taut that light rippled over the fabric as she moved. They flowed under the dress like heavy and seductive liquid, like molten metal.

"We hope you'll like it here, Mr. Cain," he was saying, as if he'd rushed around and built the place as soon as he'd heard I was coming. "May I introduce myself? Guillermo at your service. Would you care for a drink?"

I tore my eyes away from the woman's hips and said I was glad to know him and a drink would be swell.

We went over to the bar and put our feet on the elegant brass rail. The bar was glistening and spotless but the barman hustled up and wiped it mechanically, his eyes on Guillermo.

'What'll it be?" said Guillermo.

"A little bourbon, I guess," I said.

The barman gave me three inches of the finest bourbon I'd ever encountered. I said as much.

At this moment a tall man with a terrific torso appeared at my side.

"Senor Speratza," Guillermo said, and faded out of the picture.

I turned and looked the newcomer over. He had everything in the way of good looks a man could want. He was as big as a house, his eyes were black and the whites of them like porcelain. His hair was rather long and curled a little over his temples. His skin was cream-rose. He was really handsome in a Latin way.

"Mr. Cain?" he said, offering his hand.

"Sure," I said, and shook hands.

He had a grip like a bear's, but then so have I. We cracked each other's bones and pretended we weren't hurting each other.

He said how pleased he was to meet me, and how he hoped I'd enjoy my stay at Paradise Palms.

I admired his place and told him they had nothing like it in New York. That seemed to please him.

By that time I'd finished my bourbon, and he called the barman.

"Two," he said. "Take a good look at Mr. Cain because I want you to remember him. Whatever he wants is on the house, including his whole party."

The barman nodded and gave me a quick up-and-down, and I could tell there wasn't a chance he would ever mistake me for anybody else.

"All right?" Speratza asked, beaming at me.

"Swell," I said.

"I don't know what your plans are, Mr. Cain," he went on, after we had dipped into the bourbon, "but if you want a little relaxation and a mild gamble, you could do worse than spend

some of your time here."

"That's just what I do want," I said. "I'm figuring on a quiet time, and a little company when I feel that way." I fiddled with my glass and then went on, "I don't want to sound ungrateful, but frankly, I'm a little puzzled by all this attention."

He laughed. 'You're modest, Mr. Cain," he said, shrugging. 'Why even in this little place, far from anywhere, we've heard of you. We're glad to offer hospitality to such a successful gambler."

"I appreciate it," I said, and shot him a hard look. "But I'd like to get this on record for all that. I'm on vacation: that means I'm not working. I wouldn't b*e* interested in any proposition from anyone. I don't suggest that I am going to be propositioned, but this build-up is a little overwhelming. I don't kid myself that I'm all that important. So pass the word around. I'm not in the market for anything except a vacation, and persuasion makes me mad. So if you still want to entertain me, go ahead, but it's all right by me if you want to put up the shutters and send me home."

He laughed silently and easily as if I'd cracked the funniest gag in the world.

"I assure you, Mr. Cain, you won't be propositioned. This town is small but very rich. We're hospitable people. We like distinguished visitors to have a good time. All we want is for you to relax and enjoy yourself."

I thanked him and said I would.

But in spite of his smoothness and his easy laugh, I had a feeling that

he was jeering at me.

3

After we had chit-chatted a while, and had worked through some more of the bourbon, Speratza said he guessed I was about set to enjoy myself, and how about a girl?

"Well, how about her?" I said.

"I've asked Miss Wonderly to look after you," he told me, showing his big white teeth in a knowing smile. "I'll have her come over. If she's not quite your type, say so, and I'll introduce you to some of the others. We have a lot of girls working for us, but Miss Wonderly rates high with us."

I said I hoped Miss Wonderly would rate high with me.

"I'll be surprised if she doesn't," he returned, and with another smile of goodwill, he set off across the restaurant.

I looked after him and wondered how much longer it would be before he or whoever it was behind this civic welcome would demand payment. I was as sure as I could be that someone was sweetening me for a shake-down of some description.

A tall, distinguished man with white hair and a dark strong face had been looking at me. He was standing alone at the far end of the bar. He looked like a judge or a doctor or a lawyer, and his tuxedo looked like it had been cut by an angel.

I saw him beckon to the barman and say something to him. The barman gave me a quick look, nodded and turned away The white-headed man came over to me.

"I understand you are Chester Cain," he said curtly.

"Sure," I said.

He didn't seem friendly so I didn't offer to shake hands.

"I'm John Herrick," he said, looking straight at me. "You haven't heard of me, but I have heard of you. Frankly, Mr. Cain, I'm sorry to see you here. I understand you are on vacation and I only hope it is true. If it is, then I hope you won't stir up trouble here."

I stared at him. 'Thank God someone's sorry I've arrived," I said. "I

was getting to think my welcome was genuine."

"This town has enough trouble without importing wild gunmen," Herrick returned quietly. "I suppose it would be too much to ask you to give us no cause to complain?"

"You've got me wrong," I said, laughing at him. "I'm not so wild. And listen, so long as I'm left alone, I'm the nicest guy on earth. It's only when people start crowding me that I get nervous, and when I'm nervous maybe I do get a little wild."

He regarded me thoughtfully. "Forgive me for being so blunt, Mr. Cain. I am sure if you were left alone you would behave as well as anyone of us. But I think it might be as well if you changed your mind about staying in Paradise Palms. I have a feeling that someone will crowd

you before long."

I looked down at the bourbon.

"I've got the same feeling," I said, "but I'm sticking around for all that."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Mr. Cain," he said. "You may easily regret your decision."

I felt Speratza at my elbow.

Herrick turned abruptly away and walked across the room and out into the lobby.

I looked at Speratza and he looked at me. There was just a flicker of doubt in his eyes that told me he was uneasy.

"That was not one of the Welcome Committee," I said.

"You don't have to worry about him," Speratza said, flashing on his smile. It cost him something, but he did it. "He's running for election next month." He pulled a little face, and added, "On a Reform ticket."

"Seems anxious to keep Paradise Palms a nice clean town," I said dryly.

"All politicians have platforms," Speratza said, shrugging. "No one takes him seriously. He won't get in. Ed. Killeano is the people's choice."

"That's nice for Ed. Killeano," I said.

We looked at each other again, and then Speratza waved.

A girl came across the room towards us. She was wearing a bolero for a dinner jacket of blue crepe. Her skirt, split eight inches up the side, was of blue crepe, too, but her blouse was red. She was a blonde, and I bet every time she passed a graveyard the corpses sat up to whistle after her.

By the time I'd recovered my breath, she was standing at my side. Her perfume was Essence Imperiale Russe (the perfume that quickened the pulse of kings). I can't begin to describe what it did to my pulse.

Speratza was looking at me anxiously.

"Miss Wonderly," he said, and raised his eyebrows.

I looked at her and she smiled. She had small glistening teeth as white as orange pith.

"Suppose you let Miss Wonderly and me get acquainted?" I said, turning back to Speratza. "I think we'll get along fine together."

He looked so relieved that I laughed.

"That's fine, Mr. Cain," he said. "Maybe we'll see you in a little while upstairs. We have four roulette tables or we could make up a game of poker for you."

I shook my head.

"Something tells me I won't be gambling tonight," I said, and taking Miss Wonderly's arm I walked with her over to the bar.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Speratza go off, and then I gave the whole of my attention to Miss Wonderly. I thought she was terrific. I liked the long wave of her hair, and her curves — particularly her curves. Her breasts were like Cuban pineapples.

"This calls for a drink," I said, beckoning to the barman. "What part of Paradise did you escape from?"

"I didn't escape," she said, laughing, "I'm out on parole, but I thought it was just another job. I know different now."

The barman looked at us.

"What'll you have?"

"A green parrot," she said. "It's Toni's special."

"Okay," I said to the barman. "Make it two."

While the barman was fixing the drinks, I said, "So you don't think it's just another job?"

She shook her head. "I read character," she said. "I'm going to have fun with you."

I winked at her. "That's only half of it. What shall we do? I mean, let's map out a

programme."

"We'll have a drink, then dinner, then dance, then we'll go to the beach and swim Then we'll have more drinks and then——"

"Then—what?"

She fluttered her eyelashes.

"Then we'll see."

"That sounds exciting."

She pouted.

"Don't you want to dance with me?"

"Sure," I said.

I had a feeling I wasn't going to move a piano tonight.

The barman put down two large glasses, three-quarters filled with green liquid. I made a move to reach for my roll, but he had already gone.

"I can't get used to this on-the-house business," I said, picking up the glass. "You will," she said.

I took a long gulp at the drink, and hurriedly put the glass on the counter. I clutched at my throat, coughed and closed my eyes. The stuff seemed to explode in my stomach, but a moment later I felt like I was sitting on a cloud.

"Phew! That stuff kind of sneaks up on you," I said, when I could speak.

'Tom's very proud of it," she said, sipping her drink. "It's wonderful! I feel it going right down to my toes."

By the time we'd finished the green parrots we were behaving like we'd known each other for years.

"Let's eat," she said, sliding off the stool, and taking my arm. "Guillermo has a special dinner for you." She squeezed my arm and smiled up at me. Her eyes were frankly inviting.

Guillermo was there to see us into our seats. Above us were the stars. A warm breeze came in from the sea. The orchestra was playing a dreamy melody, and trumpets rolled muted notes like balls of quicksilver, round and smooth. The food was as incredibly good as the wine that went with it. We didn't have to bother to say what we wanted. The food came, we ate and marvelled at it.

Then we danced. The floor was not overcrowded, and we swept around in wide circles. It was like dancing with Ginger Rogers.

I was thinking that this was the best evening I'd ever spent when I spotted a thick-set man in a green gaberdine suit who was standing near the band. He had a flat, evil-looking puss, and he was watching me with a vicious gleam in his eyes. When he caught my eye, he turned abruptly and ducked out of sight behind a curtained exit.

Miss Wonderly had seen him, too. I felt the muscles in her back stiffen, and she missed step so I nearly stubbed her toes.

She broke away from me.

"Let's swim," she said abruptly, and walked towards the lobby, keeping her face averted.

I caught a glimpse of her in a mirror.

She was pale.

4

I drove along the coast road to Dayden Beach, a lonely strip of sand and palms a few miles from the Casino.

Miss Wonderly sat by my side. She was humming a tune under her breath, and she seemed to have shaken off her depression.

We coasted along in the moonlight. It was hot, but the breeze from the ocean came in through the open windows of the Buick.

"We're nearly there," Miss Wonderly said. "Look, you can see it now."

Ahead was a ring of palms close to the surf. There was no sign of life, and it looked good.

I drove the Buick off the road and down on to the sand until it turned too soft, then I stopped, and we got out.

In the far distance I could see the bright lights of Paradise Palms, and could hear the faint sound of music. The night was still, and sounds carried easily.

"Pretty nice," I said. "What shall we do?"

Miss Wonderly had pulled up her skirt to her knees, and began to roll down her stockings. Her legs were slim and muscular.

"I'm going in," she said.

I went around to the back of the car, unlocked the boot and took out a couple of towels and my trunks. It took me less than two minutes to shed my clothes. The warm breeze against my skin felt swell. I came around the Buick. Miss Wonderly was waiting for me. She was in her white brassiere and pants.

"That's a hell of a swim suit." I said.

She said I was right, and took them off.

I didn't look at her.

We walked across the strip of sand, hand in hand. The sand was hot, and we sank in up to our ankles. I eyed her as we began to wade through the surf. A sculptor could have cast her in bronze for a perfect

thirty-four, and he'd never have to do anything more about it. I was surprised I could take her so calmly.

We swam out to a moored raft. The sea was warm, and when she hoisted herself on to the raft, she looked like a sprite from the ocean bed.

I floated around the raft so I could study her in the moon-light. I've known plenty of women in my day, but she was a picture.

"Don't," she called; "you're making me shy."

I came up on to the raft and sat beside her.

"It's all right," I said.

She looked at me over her shoulder, then leaned against me. Her back was warm, but the tiny drops of water on her skin felt cold against me.

"Tell me the story of your life," she said.

"It wouldn't interest you."

"Tell me."

I grinned at her. "Nothing happened much until I went into the Army. I came back from France with a lot of sharp-shooting medals, a beautiful case of shell-shock and an itch to gamble. No one wanted me. I couldn't get a job. One day I got into a poker game. I kept in that poker game for three weeks. We shaved, ate and drank at the table. I made five grand, and then someone got mad. I hit him with a bottle, and he pulled a gun on me. Guns don't scare me. I was in the Ardennes push. Anything that a punk gambler starts after that is kid's stuff. I took the gun away and beat the guy soft with it. We went on playing with him under the table. We used him as a rug."

She crossed her arms over her breasts and kicked the water gently. "Tough guy," she said.

"Uh huh," I said. "I didn't like that gun. It made me think. One of these days, I thought, some guy will pull a gun on me, and he'll know how to use it. So I bought myself a gun. I wanted to be better at gun-play than anyone else. You see, after messing around in the Army you get a kind of pride in doing things better than the next guy. I stuck in a room in a tenth-rate hotel and practised pulling the gun from my belt and pulling the trigger. I did that six hours a day for a week. I

guess I got smooth. I haven't met a guy yet who can draw faster than I can. That week's work saved my life five times."

She shivered. "They said you were ruthless, but now I've seen you, I don't believe it."

"I'm not," I said, and put my hand on her thigh. "I'll tell you what happens. A punk comes along who thinks he's a world beater. He thinks there's no one as good as he is. Maybe he's slaphappy or drunk or something. I don't know. But whatever it is, he thinks he's so good that he must prove it to everyone. No one cares whether he's good or not, but the punk doesn't understand that. So what does he do? He looks around for a guy with a reputation, and he calls on the guy and starts trouble. He reasons that when he's licked this guy, he'll stand ace-high. And he usually picks on me." I swirled the water with my feet. "I take everything he gives me, because I know I can beat him any time I want, and I don't care for killing guys. There's no sense in it. So I sit there and let him rib me. Maybe I'm wrong, because it encourages him, and he goes for his gun. Then I have to kill him because I' m fond of myself in my odd way, and I don't want to die. Then people say I'm ruthless, but they're wrong. I've been crowded, and I can't help myself."

She didn't say anything.

"And it's going to happen here," I went on. "Some smart punk in this town thinks he's good, and he's arranged an elaborate set-up to show this town that he can pull a fast one on rne. He's getting me into a position so he can crowd me. I don't know who he is or when he's going to start, but I know that's what's going to happen, and something tells me that you are in this too." I smiled at her. "But whether you know what's in the wind, or whether you're just part of the extravagant trimmings, remains to be seen."

She shook her head. "You're crazy," she said. "Nothing's going to happen."

"That still doesn't tell me whether you're for me or against me," I said.

"I'm for you," she said.

I put my arm around her and swung her legs across mine so she was sitting on my lap. She leaned against my chest, her hair, damp and perfumed, against my cheek.

"I knew it would be fun with you," she said.

I took her chin between my ringer and thumb and raised her face. She closed her eyes. She looked white, like a beautiful porcelain mask in the moonlight. I looked down at her, then I kissed her. Her lips tasted salty. They were firm and cool and good. We stayed like that while the raft rode the ripples; and I didn't care what was going to happen, even though I was sure that something was going to happen.

She pushed away from me suddenly, slid off my lap and stood up. I looked at her. Her beauty gave me a hell of a buzz. She dived in as I grabbed at her, and swam away from me. I sat there and waited. After a while, she turned and came back. I tilted the raft down into the water so she slid up it on her stomach. She lay close to me, her chin in her hands, flat, her ankles crossed. She had a beautiful little back.

"Now tell me the story of your life," I said.

She shook her head. "There's nothing to tell."

"There must be. How long have you been here?"

"A year."

"Before then?"

"New York."

"A show girl."

"Yes."

"How did you meet Speratza?"

"I met him."

"Do you like him?"

"He's nothing to me."

"You take care of his distinguished visitors?"

"That seems to be the idea."

"Who else beside me have you taken care off?"

"No one."

"So I'm Paradise Palms' first distinguished visitor?"

"You must be."

"Like the job?"

She rolled over on her back. "Yes," she said, and looked at me.

I could see from the expression in her eyes that from now on I'd be wasting time by staying on the raft.

"Come on," I said. "We'll go."

She was the first to hit the water.

5

'I want to show the young lady the view from my balcony," I said to the night clerk, as he gave me my key. I expected him to remind me that this was a respectable hotel, or at least leer, but he didn't.

He bowed. "I'm delighted you find the view worth showing to madam," he said. "Is there anything I can send up for you, Mr. Cain?"

I made sure he wasn't being sarcastic, but he seemed to be falling over himself to give me service.

"Some Scotch would be nice," I said.

"There is a stock of liquor in one of the cupboards in your sitting-room, Mr. Cain," he returned. "Mr. Killeano sent it over with his compliments not an hour ago."

I nodded. "That was a nice thought," I said. I didn't show him that I was surprised.

I walked with Miss Wonderly across the deserted lobby to the elevators.

She looked at me, raising her eyebrows.

"He's just crazy to give me a good time," I said, shrugging.

"He's ready to come up and tuck us in."

She giggled.

The house dick passed us. I could tell he was the house dick by the size of his feet. He didn't seem to see us.

The elevator attendant and the bell-hops looked through Miss Wonderly as if she was the invisible woman. All these lackeys certainly had a swell line in tact.

The clock over the reception desk showed two-twenty. I wasn't even sleepy.

As we walked along the broad, thickly carpeted corridor to my room, I said, "Do you know this guy Killeano?"

"And I was hoping you were thinking only of me," she said,

reproachfully.

"I got a split mind," I said. "I think of two things at once."

I unlocked my door, and she followed me in. I never did get an answer to that question.

When I closed the door I found I didn't have a split mind after all.

Miss Wonderly disengaged herself, but only after I got a buzzing in my ears.

"I came to look at the view—remember?" she said, but I could see by the rise and fall of her chest she wasn't much colder than me.

"It's a swell view," I said, and we went across the room to look at it. As I passed a mirror I saw my mouth had a smear of lipstick on it. I even got a bang out of that.

We stood on the balcony. The moon was like a pumpkin. The traffic had gone to bed, and only a straggler or two roamed along the coast road.

I undid the buttons of her blouse. She'd taken off her bolero coat on her way up. She leaned against me and held my hands.

"I don't want you to think I do this with everyone," she said, in a small voice.

"All right," I said. "This is the night reserved for you and me."

"I know, but I don't want you to think——"

"I don't."

She turned and slid her arms around my neck. We stood like that for a long time. It was pretty nice. Then I carried her into the bedroom and put her on the bed.

"Wait for me," I said.

I undressed in the bathroom, put on a silk dressing-gown and went into the sitting-room. I nosed around in the various cupboards until I found Killeano's gifts. He'd sent me four bottles of Scotch, a bottle of brandy, and Whiterock. I took the brandy and went into the bedroom.

She was in bed. Her hair had dried and it lay like spilt honey on the pillow. She looked up at me and smiled.

I poured two brandies. I gave her one, and sniffed at the other. It had a nice bouquet.

"You and me," I said

"No, just to you," she said.

"All right, and then to you."

I drank.

She put her glass down on the bed-table without touching it. Her eyes were wide and dark.

I looked at her, feeling a chill run down my spine. The liquor grabbed at my stomach.

"I should have thought of that," I said.

The room revolved slowly, then tilted.

"Killeano's gift," I heard myself mumbling. "But not for the bride."

I was staring up at the ceiling. The lights were going out the way a movie-house dims its lights. I tried to move, but my muscles wouldn't work. I felt rather than saw Miss Wonderly get out of bed. I wanted to tell her to be careful not to catch cold, but my tongue was like a strip of limp leather.

I heard voices—men's voices. Shadows moved across the wall. Then I rode down a dark shute into darkness.

6

I began to crawl up the dark well towards the tiny pinpoint of light at the top. It looked a tough job, but I kept at it because somewhere close a woman was screaming.

Then quite suddenly I was at the top of the well, and sunlight blinded me. I heard myself groan, and as I tried to sit up, the top of my head seemed to fly off. I grabbed hold of it and rode

the pain, cursing. The woman kept on screaming. The sound chilled my blood.

I made the effort. The floor tilted under my feet as I stood up, but I crossed the room. I walked like I was breasting a hundred mile gale.

I reached the bedroom door, clung on to the doorpost and looked into the sitting-room.

Miss Wonderly was standing pressed against the opposite wall. Her arms were widespread, her hands flat on the egg-blue paint. She was as bare as the back of my hand, and her mouth hung open. As I looked at her, she screamed again.

My head felt as if it was stuffed full of cotton wool, but the scream wormed its way through and jarred all the nerves in my teeth.

I shitted my eyes from her to the floor. John Herrick lay on his back, his arms bent stiffly to the ceiling, his hands clenched. The front of his forehead was shoved in, and black blood stained his white hair and formed a gruesome halo around his head.

Heavy fists beat on the door. Someone shouted.

Miss Wonderly drew in a shuddering breath and screamed again.

I crossed the room and slapped her face. Her eyes rolled back until only the whites showed and she slid down the wall to the floor. She left two damp marks from her shoulders and hips on the egg-blue paint.

The door flew open and half the world burst in.

I faced them. They came so far and then stopped. They looked at me, they looked at Miss Wonderly and they looked at John Herrick. I

looked at them.

There was the reception clerk, the house dick, a bell-hop, two ritzy-looking women, three men in white flannels and a fat man in a lounge suit. Right in front of them all was the evil-faced guy in the green gaberdine suit I'd noticed watching me at the Casino.

The two ritzy dames started screaming as soon as they saw Herrick. I didn't blame them. I felt like screaming myself. But it made the man in the gaberdine suit mad.

"Get those bitches outa here!" he snarled. "Go on, get out, all of you."

The reception clerk and the house dick stayed, but the rest of them were shoved out.

When the door closed, the man in the gaberdine suit turned to me.

"What's going on?" he demanded, clenching his fists and shoving out his jaw.

I guessed from that dumb crack he was a copper. He was.

"Search me," I tried to say, but the words wouldn't come. My mouth felt like it was full of rusty three-inch nails.

Moving like he was in church, the big house dick tip-toed across the room, into the bedroom. He came back with a blanket which he self-consciously draped over Miss Wonderly. She lay on her back, her arms and legs grotesquely spread out, her eyes closed.

"Who's this guy?" the man in the gaberdine suit asked, turning to the reception clerk, and pointing at me.

The reception clerk looked like he was going to throw up. His face was pale green.

"Mr. Chester Cain," he said, in a far-away voice.

That seemed to give the ugly guy a buzz.

"Sure?"

The reception clerk nodded.

The guy faced me. His flat puss was loaded with viciousness.

"We know all about you," he said. "I'm Flaggerty of the Homicide

Bureau. You're in a hell of a jam, Cain."

I knew I had to talk if it killed me.

"You're crazy," I said. "I didn't do it."

"When I find a rat with your reputation locked in with a murdered man I don't have to look all that far to find his killer," Flaggerty sneered. "You're under arrest, and you'd better start talking."

I tried to think, but my mind wasn't working. I felt like hell, and my head throbbed and pounded.

The reception clerk plucked at Flaggerty's sleeve and pulled him away. He started whispering. At first Flaggerty wouldn't listen. Then I caught Killeano's name, and that seemed to hold Flaggerty. He looked at me doubtfully, then he shrugged.

"All right," he said to the reception clerk, "but it's a waste of time."

The reception clerk left the room. He had to force his way through the crowd outside in the corridor, and three or four of them tried to squeeze into the room. Flaggerty slammed the door in their faces. Then he went over to the window and stared out.

The house dick touched my arm. He offered me a glass of whisky.

I took it and drank it. It was just what I needed.

I said I would have some more.

The house dick gave me another shot. He stood smiling stupidly at me, a blend of servility and horror in his eyes.

Then quite suddenly the cotton wool in my head dissolved, the pain went away and I felt as fine as could be expected under the circumstances. I asked the house dick for a cigarette, and he gave me one and lit it for me. His fat hairy hand was trembling.

"Make the punk at home," Flaggerty said from the window. He was watching me now, and he held a snub-nosed automatic in his hand. "Stay where you are, Cain," he went on. "I'm not taking any chances with you."

"Skip it," I said. "I know it looks bad, but she'll tell you what happened as soon as she comes to the surface. I don't know a thing about it."

"They never do," Flaggerty sneered.

"I wouldn't say anything, Mr. Cain," the house dick whispered. "Not until Mr. Killeano comes."

"Is he coming?" I asked.

"Sure. You're a guest here, Mr, Cain. We want to get you out of this mess if we can."

I stared at him. "I guess there's no other hotel in the world with such service," was all I could think to say.

He simpered at me, but avoided my eye.

I looked over at Miss Wonderly. She was still out, and I made a move to go to her.

"Hold it, Cain!" Flaggerty barked. "Stay where you are."

I had a feeling that he'd shoot if I gave him half a chance, so I shrugged and sat down.

"You'd better get that dame out of her faint," I said. "She's got plenty of talking to do."

"See what you can do with her," Flaggerty said to the house dick.

The big man knelt beside her. She seemed to embarrass him, because he just stared and did nothing.

I looked around the room. Cigarette butts filled the ashtrays. Two bottles of Scotch stood empty on the mantelpiece. Another lay on the carpet and a big damp patch showed that it had leaked. There was a stink of spirits in the room. The rugs had been kicked up, a chair overturned. The stage had been set to look like a drunken orgy. It looked like a drunken orgy.

On the floor by the dead man was a heavy Luger pistol. The butt of the pistol had white hair and blood on it. I recognized the pistol. It was mine.

I sat staring at it, and I felt spooked. Unless Miss Wonderly started talking I was in a sweet jam. I hoped she'd start talking soon.

We sat around for half an hour without saying anything. Miss Wonderly moved once or twice and moaned, but she didn't come out of her faint. It was the longest faint on record. Maybe she wanted to

earn herself a title.

As I was beginning to lose patience, the door was thrown open and a short, square man, wearing a big black hat, bustled in. He reminded me of Mussolini when Mussolini used to shake his fist from his balcony. He took in the room at a glance, and then came straight to me.

"Cain?" he said, offering his hand. "I'm Killeano. There's nothing to worry about. I'll see you get a straight deal. You're my guest, and I know how to look after my guests."

I didn't shake his hand. I didn't get up.

"Your political rival's dead, Killeano," I said, eyeing him up and down. "So you've got nothing to worry about either."

He lowered his hand hurriedly and looked at Herrick.

"Poor fellow," he said. I swear there were tears in his eyes. "He was a grand, clean fighter; this is a great loss to the Administration."

"Save it for the newspapers." I advised.

We were all posed there like a bunch of dummies when Miss Wonderly sat up and started to scream again.

7

Killeano turned out to be quite a guy for getting things organized. "We're going to be fair to Cabin," he said, thumping his fist on the back of a chair. "I know it looks bad for him, but he's my guest, and I'm going to see he gets a break."

Flaggerty muttered under his breath, but Killeano was the boss.

"So what?" Flaggerty asked, shrugging. "Why waste time? I want this guy down at headquarters for questioning."

"We don't know he's guilty," Killeano barked, "and I won't have him arrested until I am satisfied you've got a case against him. We'll question him here."

"My pal." I said.

He didn't even look in my direction. "Keep that weman quiet," he went on, pointing at Miss Wonderly, who sat alone, weeping into the house dick's handkerchief. "I don't want her shooting of her mouth until we've heard the other witnesses."

I smoked and looked out of the window while Killeano yelled down the telephone and got things organized. Finally he had everything the way he wanted and we started. The reception clerk, the house dick, the elevator boy, Speratza and the barman from the Casino had been collected and lined up in the corridor outside. They were told to wait.

Miss Wonderly was taken into the bedroom in charge of a stout woman in black who'd been rushed up from the local jail to keep an eye on her. They told her to get dressed.

There were two tough-looking cops who stood behind my chair and pretended they weren't going to slug me if I showed any signs of walking out on the assembly. There was Flaggerty, two plain-clothes dicks, a photographer and a doctor. There was a stenographer, a pop-eyed little man, who sat in a corner and scribbled away as if his life, and not mine, depended on him getting it all down straight. Then there was me, and, of course, my pal, Killeano.

"All right," Kilieano said. "Now we start."

Flaggerty nearly fell over himself to get his claws into me. He stood

in front of me with his jaw thrust out and an ugly look in his beady little eyes. "You're Chester Cain?" he demanded, as if he didn't know.

"Yeah," I said, "and you're Lieutenant Flaggerty, the boy who hadn't any friends to tell him."

Killeano jumped up. "Look, Cain, this is a serious matter for you. Maybe you'd care to cut out the gags?"

"I'm the fall guy," I said, smiling at him. "Why should you worry how I handle this louse?"

"Well, it won't do you any good," Killeano muttered, but he sat down.

Flaggerty was moving about restlessly, and as soon as Killeano had settled, he started in again.

"All right," he said. "You're Chester Cain, and you're a gambler by profession."

"I don't call gambling a profession," I said.

His face went a dusty red. "But you admit you earn your living by gambling?"

"No. I haven't started to earn a living," I told him. "I'm just out of the Army."

"You've been out four months, and during that time you've been gambling?"

I nodded.

"You've made a heap of dough?"

"Fair," I said.

"You call twenty grand just fair?"

"It's not bad."

He hesitated, then decided to let it go. He'd established that I gambled.

"Is it true you murdered five men in four months?" he suddenly shot out.

Killeano jumped to his feet. "Keep that out of the record," he exclaimed, his little eyes wide with indignation. "Cain killed those

men in self-defence!"

"He killed them!" Flaggerty shouted back. "Think of it! Five men in four months! What a record! Self-defence or not, it's appalling, and every decent citizen in this country is appalled!"

Killeano sat down, muttering. I guess he wanted to be thought a decent citizen too.

"Come on," Flaggerty snarled, standing over me. "You killed those five men, didn't you?"

"Five punks with the trigger itch tried to shoot me and I defended myself," I said quietly. "If that's what you mean, then I did kill them."

Flaggerty swung around to the stenographer and threw out his arms.

"A self-confessed killer of five innocent men!" he bawled.

That got Killeano on his feet again, but I was getting sick of this.

"Skip it," I said to Killeano. "The facts are on record and the New York D.A.'s given me a clean bill. Who do you think cares what a lousy small-town copper says? Save your breath."

Flaggerty looked like he was going to have a hemorrhage.

"Get on with it," Killcano snapped, sitting down and giving me a hard look.

"We'll see who cares or not," Flaggerty said, clenching his fists. "Now I'll tell you something.

You came to Paradise Palms because you knew it was a gold mine, and you planned to clean up at the gambling tables."

"Aw nuts!" I said. "I came here for a vacation."

"And yet you ain't been in town a few hours when you rush around to the Casino," Flaggerty sneered.

"I was invited by Speratza," I said, "and not having anything better to do, I went."

"How long have you known Speratza?"

"I don't know him."

Flaggerty raised his eyebrows. "So you don't know him? Ain't it odd

Speratza should invite you over to the Casino when he didn't know you?"

"Most odd," I said, grinning at him.

"Yeah," Flaggerty said. He took a step forward. "Maybe he didn't invite you. Maybe you invited yourself because you wanted to horn in and clean up fast." He was wagging his finger in my face and yelling at the top of his voice.

"Don't do that," I said gently, "unless you want a poke in your pan."

He turned round, crossed the room, opened the door and hauled in Speratza.

Speratza was wearing light blue trousers, very neat, with pleats at the waist; and his coat was a kind of mustard colour and flared out so wide at the shoulders that he looked bigger than a house. The lapels of his coat came out in a peak about eight inches long on each side and in the left one there was a white rosebud. I bet there were some women who'd swoon at the sight of him.

He smiled around, took a look at Herrick's body under the blanket, and switched off the smile. He looked at me, then looked away fast.

I lit another cigarette. In a moment or so, I'd know where I was heading.

I found out quick enough. Speratza said that he hadn't called me. He claimed he didn't even know I was in town until he saw me in the Casino. He went on to say that he'd heard of my

reputation, and he was sorry to see me in this place.

Then I knew for sure that I was being taken for a ride. I called Speratza a liar, and he looked hurt. But he had nothing to worry about. It was his word against mine, and mine was a drug on the market.

Flaggerty got rid ot Speratza and came back looking like the cat that'd swallowed the canary.

"Lying won't get you anywhere, Cain," he said. "You'd better watch your step."

"Go take a nap under a falling axe," I said, and blew smoke in his face.

"You wait 'til I get you to the station," he snarled

"You haven't got me there yet," I reminded him.

Killeano told Flaggerty to get on with it.

"You met Herrick at the Casino?" Flaggerty demanded, after he'd choked down his rage.

"That's right."

"He told you to get out of town?"

"He advised me to get out of town," I corrected him.

"Then what did you say?"

"I said I'd stick around."

"You told him to go to hell, and you said if he didn't keep his snout out of your business you'd fix him."

"Moonshine," I said.

Flaggerty called in the Casino barman who said I had threatened Herrick. "He said 'You keep your snout out of my business or I'll push it through the back of your head'," the barman told Flaggerty. He looked shocked and sad.

"How much did they pay you to recite that little piece?" I asked.

"Never mind, Cain," Flaggerty snapped. He turned to the barman. "Okay, that's all. You'll be wanted at the trial."

The barman walked out, still shaking his head.

"Then you returned to the hotel with this woman," Flaggerty went on, pointing to Miss Wonderly, who'd been brought in. She looked out of place in her blue crepe in the sunshine. She looked unhappy too. I winked at her, but she wouldn't catch my eye. "You two got drunk. She passed out, and you got brooding about Herrick. You figured he might be dangerous, and might upset your plans, and that made you mad. So you called him and asked him to come over, because you thought you could scare him to lay off you."

"Don't be a dope," I said. "I was the sucker who passed out. Ask baby-face over there. She'll tell you. Better still, get that bottle of brandy in the next room; it's full of shut-eye medicine."

"What brandy?" Flaggerty demanded.

One of the cops went into the bedroom. He came back after a moment or so.

"No brandy," he said.

There wouldn't be," I said, shrugging. "Well, ask her. She'll tell you."

"I don't need to ask her!" Flaggerty roared. "The hotel telephone operator has a record of a call made by you at two o clock this morning. We've traced that call to Herrick's residence. Ten minutes after the call Herrick arrived here. He asked the reception clerk for your room number, and the bell-hop brought him up to this room. How do you like that?"

"Very cosy." I said.

"You and Herrick talked. You were drunk and vicious. You're a killer, Cain. You don't think twice about killing. You're as mad as a mad dog! Herrick wouldn't scare, so you hit him with your gun. You were so goddamned drunk you forgot all about him the moment you'd done it. And I'll tell you why. You wanted that floozie. She was in bed waiting for you, wasn't she?"

I laughed at him. "Ask her. She's my witness." I look at Miss Wonderly. "Listen, baby, last night you said you were for me. Well, here's your chance. You're the only one who can bust this frame wide open. I'm relying on you. They've got me in a sweet jam. There's nothing I can do about it. But if you have the guts, you can tell the truth, and that'll put me in the clear. We had a swell time together. We can still have a swell time together. Only you've got to be on my side. Now tell them."

"Wait," Killeano said, starting to his feet. His expression was a nice blend of suspicion and doubtful friendliness. He gave the idea that in spite of wanting to help me, he was gradually being persuaded that I was as guilty as hell. It was a nice act. He crossed the room and stood over Miss Wonderly. "Your word in a court of law hasn't much value. You're in a jam yourself. If Cain didn't kill Herrick, then you must have killed him. I'll tell you why. The door was lo*cked on the inside! So* don't lie. Maybe Cain was nice to you, but you've got to tell the truth because you just can't afford to lie."

I saw then that they had taken care of everything. If Miss Wonderly said I had passed out, then they'd hang the murder on her. They

wouldn't care so long as they hung it on someone.

"Okay, baby," I said. "Lie if you want to. He's right. They've been a little too smart for us."

"I'm not talking," she said, and began to cry.

That was right up Flaggerty's street. He grabbed hold of her arm and yanked her out of her chair. "You'll talk, you floozie!" he bawled, and shook her so her head snapped back.

I'd left my chair and reached him before the two cops could move.

I spun him around and hit him in the mouth. It was a sweet punch, and I felt my knuckles grate on his teeth. He went over backwards, spitting blood. It did me a power of good.

Then the cops jumped me, and one of them bounced a nightstick across my head.

I came round as Flaggerty was sitting up. I had a bump on my head, but he had lost a couple of teeth.

Killeano sorted us out.

After a while the atmosphere quietened down, but Flaggerty was still too groggy to continue questioning. Killeano took over. He stood in front of Miss Wonderly, his short fat legs astride.

"Unless you tell us what happened you'll be arrested," he said to her.

"What does it matter?" I said, rubbing my head. "Why do it the hard way? Tell 'em you passed out, and know nothing about it. They've got all the witnesses they want."

One of the coppers slapped me across the mouth.

"Shaddap," he said.

"That's going to be too bad for you," I said, and the look in my eyes made him edge away.

Miss Wonderly looked at Killeano and then at me. She was pale, but there was a light in her eyes that gave me hope.

"He didn't do it," she said. "It was a frame-up. I don't care what you do to me. He didn't do it! Do you hear? He didn*'t do it!"*

Killeano looked at her as if he couldn't believe his ears. His fat face went yellow with rage.

"You bitch!" he said, and slapped her hard across her face.

One of the cops wound his night-stick across my throat and held on. I couldn't move: I couldn't breathe.

Flaggerty and Killeano just stood looking at Miss Wonderly. She held her burning cheek and looked back at them.

"He didn't do it!" she repeated, wildly. "You can keep your rotten money. You can kill me. But I won't go through with it!"

I gave a croaking cheer.

Killeano turned to Flaggerty. "Arrest them," he said, in a thin reedy voice. "We'll get her on an accessory rap. And soften both of them." He looked at Miss Wonderly. "You'll be sorry for this," he said, and crossed the room, opened the door and went out. He closed the door gently behind him.

8

"Get that punk dressed," Flaggerty said, "and watch him." The two cops and the two plain-clothes dicks convoyed me into the bedroom. "Are we going to have a swell time with you when we get you to headquarters?" one of the plain-clothes dicks said. He was a massive guy with a red, rubbery face and hard green eyes.

His name was Hyams. The other dick was thin and dyspeptic. He had a long red nose and his ears were so big they made him look a taxi-cab with its doors wide open. They called him Solly.

"I hope I have a good time too," I said, smiling at them.

The copper who'd slapped me dug me in the ribs with his night-stick. "Get dressed, wise guy," he said. "I'm one of the boys who'll work over you."

I climbed into my clothes. They went over each garment before handing it to me. They weren't taking any chances.

Solly said, "I hope Flaggerty lets me handle that diz."

"He'll handle her himself," Hyams said. "But, I'd like to be a fly on the wall."

"What a break!" Solly exclaimed, licking his lips. "Fancy taking a tutz with her build to pieces."

"Yeah, and legally at that," Hyams said.

They grinned at each other.

I fixed my tie and put on my coat. If I didn't start something soon, it'd be too late. Once they got us down to headquarters, it was going to be just too bad for us. From the look of these thugs, Belsen would be a picnic to what they'd do to us.

"Come on, punk," Hyams said, "and listen, if you start anything, we'll shoot first and apologize after. We don't want to kill you before we've had a chance of working on you, but we will, if you try anything smart."

"I wouldn't dream of it," I said. "I've only read about the third degree. I'd like to experience it."

"You will," Solly said, looking at me out of the corners of his eyes.

We went into the sitting-room.

Flaggerty was pacing up and down. Miss Wonderly sat in a chair, and the stout woman stood behind her.

Flaggerty grinned at me. He looked nasty. There was a gap in his teeth and his lips were swollen.

"Five men in four months," he said, standing in front of me. "A killer, huh? Well, we'll show you what we do to killers. You've got two weeks before you come before a judge. That means two weeks of hell for you, Mr. Killer Cain."

"Don't be dramatic, you big-mouthed pixie," I said.

The big Irish cop, who'd slapped me before, clouted me from behind with his club. I staggered forward and ran into a bang in the jaw from Flaggerty. They were two juicy wallops, and I went down on my hands and knees.

Flaggerty gave me the boots. I got my head out of the way, but his heavy toe-cap sank into the side of my neck.

"We don't want to carry the creep." Hyams said, worried.

Flaggerty drew back. "Get up," he snarled.

I was lying near the blanket-covered body of Herrick, and I pretended to be dazed. I put my hand over my eyes so they couldn't see what I was looking at: peeping out from under the blanket was my Luger. They'd forgotten to pick it up, and when they'd covered Herrick, they'd covered the gun.

Flaggerty was bawling at me. "Get up, you louse, or I'll boot you again!"

"I'm getting up," I said, crawling slowly to one knee. I acted like I was half dead.

The blood-smeared gun butt was six feet from me. I tried to remember if any of the dicks carried guns in their hands. I didn't think they did. They were all too cocky, now they were sure I was unarmed.

Flaggerty booted me.

I flopped over on top of Herrick. It gave me a funny feeling to lie on

the body, stiff in death. My hand closed around the gun butt. It was slippery with blood, but I didn't care.

I stood up.

Flaggerty's face turned green when he saw the Luger. The other guys turned into waxworks.

"Hello," I said. "Remember me?"

I didn't point the gun at them. I held it loosely, and I stepped to the wall so I could see everyone in the room.

"Well, come on," I said, smiling at them. "We were going to headquarters for fun and games."

They didn't move or say anything.

I looked over at Miss Wonderly. She was sitting on the edge of her chair, her eyes round with wonder.

"Just a bunch of weak sisters playing at tough guys," I said to her. "You coming with me, baby?"

She got up and came over. Her knees were knocking, and I put my arm around her waist.

"Can you be useful?" I asked, pulling her against me.

"Yes," she said.

"Go into the bedroom and pack some of my stuff in one of the bags. Take the best stuff, and leave the rest, and hurry."

She went past the waxworks without looking at them, and disappeared into the bedroom.

"Any of you guys know how fast I can pull this rod ?" I asked cheerfully. "If you're curious, just give me the chance to show you," and I stuck the gun down the waist-band of my trousers.

None of them moved. There were eight of them, and the stout woman. They were too scared even to bat an eyelid.

I lit a cigarette and blew smoke at Flaggerty.

"You boys have had your fun," I said, "and now I'm going to have mine. I came here for a vacation. All I wanted to do was to have a

good time and spend my roll. But you thought you'd be smart. You wanted to murder Herrick because he was in your way. You picked me for the fall guy, and you nearly got away with it. If you hadn't been so dumb, you would have got away with it. You killed Herrick, but you haven't killed me, and you'll find I'm a lot harder to kill than Herrick. I'm going to find out why you wanted Herrick out of the way, and then I'm going to complete his job. I'm here until I've taken this town to pieces and found out what makes it tick. I'm here until I've bust your Administration wide open: try to stop me if you can. I don't like being crowded by a bunch of small-town yeggs. It hurts my pride."

Still they didn't say anything.

I beckoned to the Irish cop.

"I want you, brother," I said.

He came towards me like he was treading on egg-shells; his hands above his head.

I let him get to within six feet of me, then I hauled off and busted him in the nose. He staggered back, banged into Flaggerty, and they both sat on the floor.

They remained like that. The cop's nose began to bleed.

Miss Wonderly came out of the bedroom, carrying one of my grips.

"Wait by the door, honey," I said.

I walked over to the window, pulled back the curtain, and collected the cigar box I'd hidden behind the pelmet. The box contained eighteen grand: my vacation money.

Although I didn't even bother to watch them, they still didn't flutter a muscle. I guess my reputation stood pretty high in Paradise Palms or else they were plain yellow through to their jaegers.

"We'll go," I said to Miss Wonderly.

She opened the door.

"So long," I said to Flaggerty. "Come after me if you feel like it. I'm itching to be forced into a fight, but I don't shoot first. I don't have to." I winked at him. "I'll be seeing you."

He sat on the floor hating me with his eyes, but he didn't say

anything.

I took Miss Wonderly's arm and we crossed to the elevator.

The cage doors slid back the second or so after I'd rung.

"Going down, sir?" the attendant said. It was the guy who'd sworn he'd taken Herrick up to my room.

I pulled him out of the cage, and hit him between the eyes. He fell down and lay as quiet as a mouse.

I pushed Miss Wonderly into the cage and stepped in myself.

"Going down," I said, smiling at the attendant, and closed the cage doors.

Chapter Two
THE HEAT

1

"Do they know where you live?" I asked Miss Wonderly, as I shot the Buick out of the hotel garage.

She shook her head.

"Sure?"

"Yes. I changed my apartment a day or so ago. No one knows yet."

"We'll go there and get you some clothes," I said. "Where is it?"

She clutched my arm. "No. Let's get out of town. I'm scared."

"We've got the time," I said. "And you don't have to be scared. They won't get us if we use our heads. Now where is the place?"

"It's at the corner of Essex and Merrivale."

I nodded. "I know. I passed it as I came in."

I pushed the Buick along, and I kept my eye on the mirror.

No one was following us—yet.

"You and I have a lot to talk about," I said, casually. "Thank you for being on my side."

She shivered. "Will they catch us?"

"They couldn't catch a train," I said, but I wasn't all that happy. I wondered if they'd taken the number of my car at the hotel, and how soon it would be before the attendant gave it to Flaggerty. I wondered where in hell we were going to hole up, or if it'd be better to get out of town. . I didn't want to get too far away because I was determined to go after Killeano. I had to be near at hand if I was going to bust him, and I was going to bust him all right.

"Listen, honey," I said, in my soothing voice, "I want you to use your head. Is there anywhere

in town or near at hand where we could stay and be reasonably safe?"

She twisted around. "We're going to get out of here," she said wildly. "You don't know what they'd do to me if they caught me."

I patted her hand and nearly pushed in some guy's fender who had pulled out suddenly from behind a truck. We cursed each other amiably.

"Now take it easy," I said. "No one's going to catch you. But we're bucking the police, and they'll seal up all the highways leading out of town. We shan't get far with their two-way radio sets working against us. We'll have to hole up until the heat's cooled off. Then we'll slide out one night, and blow."

"We'd better go now," she said, clenching her fists.

"Well be all right, but you must think. We want a nice snug hideaway for three or four days. Now think, and keep on thinking."

While I was talking we reached Essex and Merrivale. I whizzed the Buick down Essex Street and nailed her before a shabby looking apartment block.

"Come on," I said, grabbing the cigar box, "let's hustle."

We ran up the wooden steps to the house, and she led me up the stairs into a big bedroom overlooking the front of the house. She packed her things as if the devil was pricking her with his fork. She was so efficient that I just stood back and gave her room. In three minutes flat she had a big grip crammed full of the pick of her cupboard and drawers.

"Swell," I said, grabbing the grip. "Now watch my dust,"

As I reached the head of the stairs, I paused. She clutched at my arm, looking at me with round eyes.

"What is it?" she whispered.

I motioned her to be quiet and listened. The radio was giving a police message. They were telling Paradise Palms to watch out for us.

"How do you like being called a blonde killer?" I asked, smiling at her.

She pushed past me and scurried downstairs. At the foot of the stairs, she stopped. A thickset man in his shirt sleeves had come out of the front room. He stood gaping at her.

"Hey, you," he said, stepping up to her. "Not so fast. They want you!"

Miss Wonderly gave a startled squeak, spun on her heel and tried to

bolt up the stairs, but he reached out and grabbed her.

"They want me too," I said, coming down slowly.

The man let go of Miss Wonderly as if she'd bitten him. He stepped back, his face going a dirty white.

"I don't know anything about anything, mister," he said in H low, hoarse voice.

I smiled at him. "You don't look as if you do," I said, and put Miss WonderIy's bag down. "Where's your telephone, bud ?"

He waved his hand to the room from which he had just come. I jerked my head and he went in. I followed him. Miss Wonderly pressed herself against the wall. She didn't look as cute as she had when she'd pressed herself against my hotel wall, but then, she was dressed this time. It makes a difference.

The room was, big and untidy. There were shutters up at the windows to keep out the sun.

An old woman was holding the telephone receiver to her ear. When she saw me, she gave a gasp, and dropped the receiver. It fell with a little crash on the table. Then she sat down heavily in a rocking-chair and threw her apron over her face. I thought she looked pretty dumb sitting like that, but it seemed to give her some comfort.

I took hold of the telephone and jerked. The cord came away from the wall, and I tossed the instrument on the floor.

"Now you won't be able to talk to anyone about anything," I said, winking at the man. "That'll be a nice change for you."

He jerked and shook and sweated plenty. I seemed to scare him.

I left them huddled and silent, and collected Miss Wonderly. She seemed scared too. Hell! I

was scared myself.

We ran down the steps, and I slung her bag into the car. We bundled in, and I shot out of Essex Street like a cat off a hot stove.

"Have you thought of a place, honey?" I asked, as we bolted along Ocean Drive.

She shook her head. "No."

"Well, concentrate or else we'll be in a jam."

She banged her clenched fists together and started to cry. She was scared all right.

I looked across the Bay. The opalescent waters of the Atlantic and the Gulf were changing hues as clouds moved overhead. Scattered green islands gleamed like emeralds on an azure field. On the distant horizon the Gulf Stream pencilled a line of indigo, with here and there above it a smudge of grey smoke from the funnels of a passing steamer.

"How about those islands?" I said, slowing up. "Know any of them?"

She sat up, and her tears dried like magic. "Of course, the very place," she said. "Cudco Key. It lies to the left of the islands, and it's small. I know a shack there. I found it when I was out there once."

"Fine," I said. "If we can get there, that's where we'll go."

I didn't know where we were, but as we were heading in the same direction as the islands, I didn't worry. We passed Dayden Beach, and I looked at the moored raft. It seemed a long time since we sat on it together. We kept on, and after a while I saw a wharf ahead. That gave me an idea.

"We'll trade this car for a boat," I said.

"I'm glad you're with me," she said. It came from the bottom of her heart.

I patted her knee. It was a nice knee, and she didn't take it away, so I left my hand on it.

We stopped by the wharf and got out. I made sure my gun was handy, and I kept a firm grip on my cigar box. That was one thing I wasn't losing. We looked around. There were a number of U Drive pleasure boats moored along the wharf, but they weren't fast enough for me. I

wanted something that'd shake a police boat if it came to shaking police boats.

I found what I was looking for after a while. She was a trim thirty-foot craft; mahogany and steel and glistening brass. She looked very fast.

"That's her," I said to Miss Wonderly.

While we were looking at the boat, a fat little man came out of a house on the water-front, and hustled down to the boat. He gave us a hard look, then stepped on board.

"Hey!" I said.

He looked up, and climbed off the boat again. His face was burned nearly black by the sun, and his hair was bleached yellow-He didn't look a bad guy in a tough, hard way.

"Want me?" he said, eyeing us over, then he grinned. "By Golly!"

I hunched my shoulders and grinned back.

"Not you—your boat," I said.

"Chester Cain, by Jeese!" he said. He took elaborate precautions to keep his hands still and not to make any move, but he wasn't scared.

"Sure," I said.

"That's okay with me," he said. "The radio hasn't let up for the past half-hour. The whole town knows you're on the mn." He eyed Miss Wonderly. She apparently made a hit, because he pursed his mouth in a soundless whistle. "So you want my boat?"

"That's the idea," I said. "I'm in a hurry, but I'm not going to rob you. Take my Buick and a grand?"

His eyes opened.

"Do I get the boat back?" •

"Sure, if they don't sink her."

"Sink her? They'll never see her."

His optimism made me feel good.

"She that fast?"

"Fastest boat on the coast. Fate was kind to you, sending you to me."

"I guess so. So you'll trade?"

He grinned. "I don't want to, but I'll trade. I never did like that buzzard Herrick anyway."

"Sure this is your boat?" I asked.

"You bet. Tim Duval's the name. I use her for Tunny fishing and other things. When you're out of this jam, you come on a trip with me. You'll like it." He winked. "I'll be glad to have her back, but keep her as long as you like. She's gassed up and ready to go. She'll take you to Cuba if you're figuring on going that far."

Miss Wonderly came staggering back with the two suit-cases. She wasn't scared to make herself useful. She looked kind of cute in her blue crepe—like she was in a fancy dress, and it showed off her figure. Duval had trouble keeping his eyes off her. I had trouble too.

We dumped the grips on board, and then she ducked down into the cockpit.

"Get into the cabin, sweetheart," I called. "It'll be safer there." I didn't want anyone to see her as I pulled out along the long wharf.

She went into the cabin and shut the door.

"Want me to come along?" Duval asked hopefully.

I shook my head. "No."

He shrugged. "Okay," he said. "I'd sooner travel alone— with her. Nice, eh?"

"Huh uh," I said, and gave him the keys of the Buick.

"You won't have any trouble with that boat. She's sweet to handle;" he said, taking the keys. "I'll look after the heep for you."

"Yeah, look after her," I said.

"Sure will."

I went aboard and started the engines.

Duval cast off the lines.

"I think Flaggerty's a buzzard too," he said.

That told me he wasn't going to sell us out as soon as we were out of sight.

"So do I," I said.

I spun the wheel and edged the boat through the narrows to the cut

that led to the outer bay.

The swell was long, fairly easy. After a while I rounded the breakwater and we were in the bay.

I looked back.

Duval was waving. I waved back. Then I gunned the engine and the boat leapt forward with a roar, throwing water and cream-white foam.

2

Cudco Key was a tiny island five miles from the chain of islands skirting Palm Bay. It had a dazzling white beach bordered with coconut palms, white orchid trees, covered with pale white flowers delicately veined with green, and the woman's tongue trees with their long slender pods in which seeds rattle monotonously at the slightest breeze. Further along the coast, and inland were mangrove and buttonwood thickets. Spires of smoke hung in the air where mangroves were being burnt for charcoal.

I ran the boat into the heart of the mangrove thickets, and I was fairly sure that no one would spot it from the sea.

We left our grips on board and we struck inland to find the shack.

Miss Wonderly had changed into bottle-green linen slacks, a halter and an orange wrap around to keep her curls in place. She looked cool and cute.

It was hot on the island, and I had stripped down to a singlet and gaberdine slacks, but I

sweated plenty.

We kept to the thickets. Miss Wonderly said there were only a couple of dozen Conch fishermen living on the island, but we didn't see any of them.

I got the surprise of my life when we found the shack. It not only commanded a fine view of Palm Bay and Paradise Palms in the distance, but it wasn't a shack at all. It was a hurricaneproof house that had been built as an experiment by the Red Cross some years back in their drive to counteract storm damage.

These hurricane-proof houses are built like small forts. They're made of reinforced concrete and steel; steel rods anchor the house to solid rock. The roof, floors and walls are of concrete, the walls a foot thick. All partitions extend from the roof through the house to bedrock. Window-sashes are of steel, with double-strength glass and double shutters. Wood is used only in the triple-strength cypress doors. Drain-pipes run from the roof to a cistern cut in the bedrock under the house, providing water in emergencies.

This house was on the far side of the island, and because of its exposed position no other dwelling was within two miles of it. It was a successful experiment, but no one lived in it now. I guess the Conchs preferred their wooden shacks or else someone was asking a high rent.

"Your shack, eh?" I said, looking at the place. "Some shack."

Miss Wonderly clasped her hands behind her back, and raised herself on her toes. She admired the house.

"I only caught a glimpse of it from a boat," she said. "I was told no one lived in it. I didn't think it was as good as this."

"Let's try and get in," I said.

It wasn't easy, and in the end I had to shoot off the lock of the front door. The place was dirty and as hot as an oven, but after opening all the windows the air got better.

"We can make this pretty comfortable," I said, "and it's safe. Let's have a look around."

I found a small harbour that had been built while the house was under construction. Mangroves had overgrown it, and it was practically invisible. I only came upon it by nearly falling down the ramp that had been covered with dead foliage.

"This is terrific," I said, after I'd cleared away the undergrowth. "We'll get the boat round here and settle in. Come on, let's go."

As I steered the boat around the island, I came upon the village community dumped down on the east shore. There were three or four ketches moored to the sea wall, a dozen or so wooden shacks and a big wooden building that looked like a store.

"Stay in the cabin," I said to Miss Wonderly. "I'm going in to get some provisions."

There were a bunch of men standing on the sea wall as I edged the boat to a mooring ring. One of them, a big fellow, stripped to the waist and barefooted, shambled forward and caught the rope I tossed him.

The men eyed me over as I climbed on to the sea wall, eyed the boat over and exchanged glances.

"That's Tim's boat," the big fellow said, rubbing his hands on the seat

of his dirty white canvas trousers.

"Yeah," I said, and in case they thought I'd stolen it, I added, "I hired it off him. I'm on a fishing vacation."

"Swell boat," the big fellow said.

"That's so," I said.

I made the rope fast, conscious that they hadn't taken their eyes off me for a moment, then I strolled over to the store, hoping that no one would start anything. No one did.

The storekeeper told me his name was Mac. I told him my name was Reilly. He was a wizened little guy with bright eyes of a bird. I liked him. When I started buying, he liked me. I bought a load of stuff.

We roped in some of the loungers, including the big fellow, to cart the stuff down to the boat. Mac came, too, but he didn't carry anything.

"Duval's boat," he said, when he reached the sea wall.

"That guy seems pretty well known around here," I said.

"Sure is," he said, and grinned.

I lit a cigarette and gave him one.

"Kind of quiet here," I said, looking up and down the deserted beach.

"Sure is," Mac said. "No one bothers us. We get along."

"I guess you do," I said.

"Hear there was some excitement over at Paradise Palms," he said, after a pause. "A political killing. The radio's been yelling its head off."

"I heard that too," I said.

"I reckon it's no business of ours."

I wondered if that meant anything.

"You alone?" he went on, looking down into the boat.

"Yeah," I said.

He nodded, then spat into the sea.

"Thought maybe you'd brought your wife along."

"Not married," I said.

"We all can't be."

The big fellow climbed off the boat and came over. He was sweating plenty.

"That's the lot," he said, then added, "the cabin's locked."

"Yeah," I said.

Mac and the big fellow exchanged glances. I guess they were thinking hard.

I gave the big fellow a fin. He took it like it was a C note. He was excited.

"Maybe we'll see you again," Mac said hopefully. "Any friend of Tim's my friend."

"That's good news," I said, and meant it.

"I reckon Duval wouldn't hire his boat to anyone but a right guy," Mac went on.

"I guess not," I said, thinking that Duval rated high around the island. I stepped down into the boat.

"A patrol noses around here every so often," Mac said, sitting on his heels so he was near my ear.

"That so?" I said, looking up at him.

He closed one eye. "We don't tell 'em much."

"Fine," I said."

"Maybe you'd better let her out. It must be plenty hot in that cabin," he went on, looking over my head and admiring the view.

"Huh-uh," I grunted, then added, "Don't be smarter than you can help."

He took out a hunk of chewing tobacco and bit off a lump.

"The cops around here don't rate with me," he said, chewing hard. "That guy Herrick tried to clamp down on our trade. He was a

nuisance. I reckon the boys are kind of grateful someone removed him."

I nodded. "I heard he wasn't popular."

I cast off and started the engine. I got gas if you ever want it," he called after me.

I waved.

3

A moon that looked like a Camembert cheese hung in the cloudiest sky. The nodding palms cast long, spooky shadows. The red glow of the charcoal fire reflected on Miss Wonderly's skin. She lay on her back, her arms crossed behind her head, her knees bent. She wore blue

shorts, a red halter and sandals. Her honey-coloured hair hid one side of her face.

I knelt before the fire, grilling a couple of spareribs. They smelt and looked fine.

We were tired, but we had the house ship-shape. I was surprised the way Miss Wonderly put her back into cleaning the joint. We had scrubbed and swept and dusted. We had laid coconutmatting down in two rooms and shifted the boat's bunks into one of them. We'd unscrewed the two small arm-chairs from the cabin and dragged them into the house, and we'd taken the table too. With a couple of good paraffin lamps, the place looked almost like home.

In the cockpit of the boat I had found a Thompson and an automatic rifle and enough ammunition to start a minor war. I brought the automatic rifle to the house, but left the Thompson in the cockpit. I didn't know when we might be cut off suddenly from the house or the boat, and I reckoned a division of weapons wise.

There was a portable radio on the boat, and we brought that up to the house too.

It had been a good day's work in spite of the heat, and now we were ready for something solid to eat.

I divided up the spareribs, the hashed brown potatoes and a couple of Cokes.

"Here we go," I said, dumping the plate on Miss Wonderly's chest. "Eats."

She sat up, after putting the plate on the beach wrap she had spread out so she shouldn't get sand in her hair. In the moonlight and the firelight she looked swell.

"Still scared?" I asked, cutting my meat.

She shook her head. "No."

We'd been so busy that we hadn't even thought about Killeano and the rest of them.

"It doesn't seem like it all happened this morning, does it?" I said. "I guess you've got some talking to do. How do you figure in all this?"

She sat for a while without saying anything. I didn't rush her, but I had to know.

"I was a fool," she said suddenly. "I came out here because I was promised a job, and because I was sick of pushing off men who thought showgirls were easy to make. The job sounded good, but it turned out to be just another masher's build up. He didn't want me to work. He wanted me to give him a good time. It wasn't my idea of a good time, so I found, myself stranded here without the means to get back."

"When will you girls learn?" I said.

"Speratza came along. He wanted someone to look after the flowers and decorations at the Casino. I got the job."

"You and flowers go together," I said.

She nodded. "It was all right for eight months. I liked it, and the money was good. Then suddenly Speratza sent for me. He was in his office with Killeano and Flaggerty. They stared me over, and I didn't like the way they whispered to each other. Killeano said that I'd do, and he and Flaggerty went off. Then Speratza told me to sit down and offered me a thousand dollars to entertain you. I didn't know it was you then. He told me you were an important visitor and said, for reasons I needn't know, I was to entertain you, and if I did the job well he'd give me the money and my ticket home."

"And what did you think?"

"I didn't know what to think. It was an awful lot of money, and I wanted to get home, but there was something about the way Speratza talked that warned me not to touch the job. I asked him exactly what I had to do. He said I was to take you around, give you a good time, and then persuade you to take me back to your hotel. He said I was to sleep with you, but you would be doped and you wouldn't bother me. It was important that I should spend the night in your room. I thought

it was a divorce frame-up. I didn't like it. and I refused." She gave a little shiver and stared across the moonlit bay. "He tried to persuade me, but the more he talked the surer I was that something was wrong. Then he got up and told me to follow him. We took a trip in his car to the harbour."

She stopped talking and stared down at her hands. I didn't hurry her, and after a while, she went on.

"He took me to a house on the waterfront. As soon as I was inside I knew what it was. I could tell by the awful old woman and the girls that peered over the banisters. It was horrible."

I gave her a cigarette. We smoked in silence for a few minutes.

"He said he'd keep you there if you didn't play. Is that it?" I said.

She nodded. "I was so scared I would have done anything to get out."

"That's all right," I said.

"Well, I said I'd go through with it, and he took me back to the Casino. He said they'd watch everything I did. He and Flaggerty would be with us the whole time, unseen, but watching, and if I warned you, they would kill you and send me to that place."

"Nice guys," I said. "What happened when I passed out?"

"I knew the brandy was drugged. They had to tell me that so I wouldn't drink it myself. After you had passed out, I let them in. Speratza and Flaggerty looked you over and put you into the bed. They told me to get in with you and to stay there until it was daylight. They told me I wasn't to move until then. I was so scared I did what I was told. I knew something horrible would happen. I heard them moving about in the sitting-room, and I know now what they were doing. I stayed awake all night, and then when it got light I went into the sitting-room. Well, you know what happened then."

I shifted closer to her.

"But you sold them out in the end," I said. "Why? Why did you take that risk?"

She looked away. "I wouldn't rail-road anyone into murder," she said. "Besides, I said I was on your side, remember?"

"I remember," I said, "but you were in a jam. I wouldn't have blamed

you if you had played with them."

"Well, I didn't," she said.

I turned her face so I could see her.

"I could go for you," I said.

She slid her arms round my neck and pulled my head down. "I've gone for you," she said, her lips against my neck. "I don't care. I can't keep it to myself. I wouldn't let them hurt you."

We played around for a while: loving her wasn't hard work.

"Now I wonder what I'm going to do with you?" I said, after the Camembert moon had moved around to our left.

"Do?" She sat up, her eyes scared. "What should you do?"

"Can I leave you here? Can you manage on your own?"

She clutched at my arm. "What are you going to do?"

"Use your nut, baby," I said. "I've got plenty to do. There's Killeano—remember him? That fat little guy who looks like Mussolini?"

"But you're not going back to Paradise Palms?"

"Sure I'm going back, I only came here so you could be safe."

"Oh, you're crazy," she cried. "What can you do against so many?"

"You'll be surprised," I said, smiling at her. "There's a murder rap hanging over us. I'm going to bust that for a start. We're not safe until I find Herrick's killer and persuade him to come clean."

"But you can't go back alone," she said frantically.

"I'm going back alone, and I'm going in a few minutes," I told her. "Ah I want to be sure about is that you'll be all right while I'm away."

"I won't be all right," she said quickly—too quickly.

I shook my head at her. "Oh yes, you will. Now listen, I'll be back tomorrow night. I'm taking the boat, and you're to stay near the house. You've the rifle and enough food. You keep your ears and eyes open, and you'll be all right. If anyone comes, lock yourself in the house. They won't get at you, if you use your head. But no one will come."

"Suppose you don't come back?" she asked, her lips trembling.

"You'll still be all right," I said. "I'm leaving you seventeen grand. Go to Mac. He'll get you back to New York somehow. I'll drop in and talk it over with him."

"No," she said, "don't do that. I'd rather no one knows I'm alone."

That made sense.

"But you mustn't leave me." She pressed her face against mine. "I don't want to lose you now I've just found you."

We argued back and forth, but I was going anyway. She got the idea at last, and stopped trying to persuade me. She sat with her hands folded in her lap, looking scared and sad.

"All right," she said.

"Herrick knew something important. It was so important that they killed him," I said. "Can you think what it could have been?"

She shook her head. "I hardly knew him. He used to come to the Casino, but I never spoke to him."

"Did he have a girl?"

She nodded. "He went around with a red-head. She's a singer, and has an apartment on Lancing Avenue, a big chromium and black marble block on the left as you go up."

"Know her?"

"No, but I've heard the other girls talk about her. She's hard, not my type."

"Her name?"

"Lois Spence."

"Okay, maybe she'll know something."

"You will be careful?" she said, putting her hand on my knee.

"Sure," I said. "Now Killeano. Know anything about him?"

"Only that he is important, owns the Casino and is the City Administrator."

"Did you ever ask yourself why Herrick should hang around the Casino? He wasn't a gambling man, was he?"

"No."

"Well, all right," I said, getting up. "Maybe Miss Spence will answer all the questions. I'm going to dress now, honey."

I went into the house and put on a dark blue linen suit, a dark blue shirt and a dark red tie. I went into the sitting-room and found her waiting for me. She was making a brave show, but I could see she was near tears.

I gave her the cigar box.

"Take care of that, sweetheart," I said. "That's all the dough I have in the world, and I sweated earning it."

She clung to me.

"Don't go," she said.

I patted her.

"If anything should happen to you . . ." she said.

"It won't. Come down to the boat,"

It was still hot, and mangroves burning in the still air smelt fine. She looked so nice standing in the moonlight I nearly said the hell with it. But I didn't.

I cast off.

"No sleeping-draught for me tomorrow night," I called, as the boat drifted out of the harbour.

She waved, but she didn't say anything. I guess she was crying.

4

Paradise Palms looked if anything nicer by night than by day. I could see the lighted dome of the Casino in the distance as I steered the boat towards the wharf. I wondered if there would be a reception committee with shot-guns waiting for me when I landed.

It was just after ten thirty, and the wharf, as far as I could see from this distance, was deserted. I cut the engine, put the Thompson where I could get at it, and drifted in.

When I was within twenty yards of the wharf, I saw a short fat figure rise up out of the shadows and walk to the edge of the wharf. I recognized Tim Duval.

He caught the rope I threw to him and made fast.

"Hello ," he said, grinning.

I glanced up and down the wharf.

"Hello," I said.

"They came down here a couple of hours back, but I kept out of sight. The old woman told them I'd gone on a trip. That took care of the boat. They didn't find your heep, and they shoved off after nosing around. There were a lot of them."

I nodded. "Thanks," I said.

He hitched up his dirty grey flannels.

"What now?" he said.

"I've got a little business in town. How's the heat?"

He whistled. "Fierce," he said, "but their description of you is punk. They're calling you handsome."

I laughed. "Well, I'm going in."

"I guess it takes a lot to stop a guy like you. Want me to come along?"

"Why in hell do you want to mix yourself up in this?" I asked.

"Damned if I know," he said, running thick fingers through bleached hair. "Maybe I don't like this town. Maybe I don't like Killeano. Maybe I'm nuts."

"I'll go in alone ," I said.

"Okay. Anything I can do?"

"I want a car. Can you lend me one?"

"Sure. It looks a wreck, but it goes."

"Get it."

I smoked while I waited. I could hear the dance music from the distant Casino.

Duval came back after a while, driving a grey Mercury convertible. It looked as if it had been kicked around plenty, but the engine sounded all right.

I got in. "Want me to pay you now?" I asked.

"I got the boat, your heep and a grand, haven't I?" he said. "What more do I want? Except maybe I'd like to horn in on this."

I shook my head. "Not yet, anyway," I said.

He shrugged. I could see he was disappointed.

"Oh well," he said.

I had an idea. "Know any newspaper men around town?"

"Sure. There's Jed Davis of the Morni*ng Star. He's often* around. We go fishing together."

"Get me some dirt on Killeano. Ask Davis. Dig deep. A guy like Killeano must have plenty of dirt in his life. I want all I can get."

His face brightened. "I'll get it," he said.

"And there's a cat-house somewhere on the waterfront, want to know who owns it. Speratza of the Casino has access to it. I'd like to tie him in closer than that if I can."

"I know the joint," he said. "Okay, I'll get the stuff."

I started the engine. Then I had another idea.

"Gimme your telephone number," I said.

He gave it to me.

"I may run into trouble," I said, eyeing him. "I might not get back. If that happened, would

you do something for me?"

He got it all right.

"Sure, I'll look after her. Do you want to tell where she is?"

I had to trust someone. I thought I could trust him.

"Cudco Key," I said.

He nodded. "Yeah, that's a good place. Mac's there."

"I know, and he's a good guy."

"Hell! We're all good guys. I'll look after her,"

"I like that girl," I said slowly. "If anything should happen to her …" I gave him the cold eye.

He nodded. "I'll look after her," he said

I thanked him and drove away.

Lancing Avenue was in the better-class district of Paradise Palms. It was a broad avenue lined by Royal Palms that were as straight-cut as a row of skittles.

I found the chromium and black marble apartment block without difficulty. It had a halfcircular drive to the entrance and a lot of bright lights. It looked like a Christmas tree out of season.

I drove the Mercury up the drive. A big, gaudy convertible threatened to squeeze me off the road as it passed, making a noise like snowflakes on a window. It stopped before the entrance and three dizzy-looking dames, all cigarettes, arched eyebrows and mink coatees got out and went in.

The Mercury made me fell like a poor relation calling on his rich relatives.

I parked behind the limousine and went in too.

The lobby was no smaller than an ice-skating rink, but cosier. There was a reception desk, an enquiry desk, a flower-stall, a cigarette kiosk, and a hall porter's cubby hole. It was class; the

carpet tickled my ankles.

I looked around.

The three dizzy dames had gone over to the elevators. One of them pulled down her gridle with both hands and gave me the eye. She had too much on the ball for me to be more than mildly interested. She was the kind of dame who'd pick out your good inlays without an anaesthetic. I took myself over to the hall porter. He was a sad old man dressed up in a bottlegreen uniform. He didn't look as if he had much joy in his life.

I draped myself over the counter of his cubby-hole.

"Hi, dad," I said.

He looked up and nodded. "Yes, sir?" he said.

"Miss Spence. Miss Lois Spence. Right?"

He nodded again. "Apartment 466, sir. Take the right-hand elevator."

"She in."

"Yes, sir."

"That's fine," I said, and lit a cigarette.

He looked at me and wondered, but he was too well bred to ask why I didn't go up and see her. He just waited.

"How are you going off for holding money, dad?" I asked casually.

He blinked. "Always do with some, sir," he said.

"Kind of tough here?" I asked, glancing around. "All silk for the customers and crepe for the staff?"

He nodded. "We're supposed to make it in tips, sir," he said bitterly. "But they are so mean here they wouldn't give a blind beggar the air."

I took out a five spot and folded it carefully. He eyed it the way I eye Dorothy Lamour.

"Miss Spence interests me," I said. "Know anything about her?"

He glanced around uneasily. "Don't flash that money so anyone can see it, sir," he begged. "I wouldn't like to lose my job."

I hid the note in my hand, but I let the end show in case he forgot what it looked like.

"Do you talk or do you talk?" I asked pleasantly.

"Well, I know her, sir," he said. "She's been here three years, and you get to know them after a while." He said it as if he hated her guts.

"Nice to you?"

"Maybe she doesn't mean it, sir," he said, shrugging.

"You mean she doesn't kick you in the face because her leg doesn't stretch that far?"

He nodded.

"What's her line?" I asked.

His old face sneered. "Tom—he runs the elevator—says she'd flop at the drop of a hat. Perhaps you know what he means. I don't."

"It's a cynical way of saying she's a push-over," I said. "Is she?"

He shook his head. "Maybe the first time, but not after that. She kind of whets a guy's appetite and then holds him off. It comes kind of expensive the second time. I've seen guys climb walls and gnaw their way across the ceiling because they couldn't make the grade."

"She kind of gets in your blood, huh?"

He nodded. "One sap shot himself because of her."

"Tough."

"I guess he was crazy."

"How did Herrick make out with her?"

He eyed me narrowly. "I don't know whether I should talk about him, sir. The boys in blue have been buzzing around here today like wasps."

I showed him the other end of the five spot, hoping it would look more interesting that way.

"Try," I said.

"Well, he was different. He and the Basque."

"The Basque?"

He nodded. "He's up there now."

"She played around with Herrick?"

"Well, they went around together. Herrick had a lot of dough, but I wouldn't say they played, if you mean what I think you mean, sir."

"You wouldn't, eh? How about the Basque?"

He shrugged. "You know what these women are like. They have to have one regular among the many. I guess he's it."

"And not Herrick?"

"He was different. He never stayed nights with her. I guess they were on a different footing. Maybe they were in business or something together."

"You wouldn't swear to that?"

"No, but she didn't take any trouble to hide up the Basque from Herrick. He'd be with her when Herrick called. It seemed to make no difference."

"Who is this Basque, anyway?"

"Name's Juan Gomez. He's a jai alai player. The local champ around here."

"What does he do beside play?"

The old man's eyes rolled. "Gets out of training with Miss Spence, I reckon."

"Did the cops pay her a visit?"

He nodded.

"Hear anything?"

"No, but Gomez was with her." A wintry smile crossed his face. "I bet she had to do some fancy talking to explain what that dago was doing in her room at eight o'clock in the morning."

"Probably said he'd come to fix the refrigerator," I said. "Ever see Killeano in here?"

"No."

"Right," I said, and slid him the five spot. He snapped it up the way a lizard nails a fly.

I was moving away when he leaned forward and whispered, "Here they come now."

I looked over my shoulder and saw them. Being interested in women, I looked first at Miss Spence. She had on a pair of long-waisted, rust-coloured slacks, Bata shoes, a brown and white print shirt and an orange scarf. Apart from being a trifle heavy in the beam, she had a longlimbed languorous figure. Her red hair was as artificial as her long-spiked eye-lashes. Her mouth was wide and glistening, and her eyes were the colour of forget-me-nots, and as expressionless. She wore Revlon's "Fatal Apple" make-up (the most tempting new colour since Eve winked at Adam). As she wafted past me on a cloud of No. 5 Chanel, I observed the utterly disdainful expression on her face and the strange sins that lurked in her eyes.

I decided it'd be interesting to have a session with her, providing two strong men were outside the door to rescue me if the going got too tough, and if she left me enough strength to scream for help.

The Basque was a turn on his own. He was tall and broad and unpleasantly strong looking, and as lithe as a jungle cat and twice as dangerous. His brown, lean face was coldly savage, and there was a chilled expression in his eyes that didn't make you feel you wanted to slap him on the back.

Miss Spence handed over the keys to the hall porter as if he was the invisible man, and then strolled across the lobby, with Gomez tailing her.

As she walked, she managed to make her hips quiver, and all the men in the lobby, including me, peeped at them.

Half way across, she paused to ask her boy friend for a cigarette. He was lighting it for her when a loudspeaker extension crackled into life.

"Paradise Palms Police Department," said a tinny voice. The loudspeaker hummed slowly, then spluttered to sound: "Repeat as of nine fifteen on Herrick killing. Wanted: Chester Cain. Description: six foot one—a hundred and ninety pounds —about thirty-five—dark hair

—sallow complexion—wearing grey suit, grey soft hat. Probably trying to get out of town . . . don't take any chances—he's dangerous. Anyone recognizing the wanted man should report at once by telephone to the Police Department. No attempt should be made to apprehend this man unless you are armed. That is all."

Miss Spence threw down her cigarette and stamped on it.

"Haven't they caught that bastard yet?" she demanded angrily.

5

Jai alai is the fastest and toughest sport in the world. It is played with a *cesta* or basket, strapped to the player's right hand. The curved, three-foot basket has a maximum depth of five inches. A player can wear out three or four baskets during a contest. The hard, rubber-cored ball or pelota*,* slightly smaller than a baseball, is covered with goatskin.

The ball is driven with such speed that it sometimes breaks a leg or arm. The playing court or *cachet is spacious, its gr*een walls rising to the high-netted skylight of the auditorium. Where the concrete of the *cacha* floor ends in the red foul line and meets the wooden floor of the auditorium, there is a vertical wire screen which protects the tiers of customers.

The server drops the ball, catches it on the rebound, and hurls it with a terrific forehand stroke against the wall. The opposing player has to intercept the ball with his basket and keep it in play. The players move like lightning, their cesta-lengthened hands reaching out miraculously to intercept and return bullet-like rallies of the ball. The pelot*a c*ontinues in play until it falls in illegal territory, or a contestant fails to make good a return.

There are few ball games calling for greater strength, endurance and skill, and it is said most jai alai players die young. If they're not sooner or later severely injured by the ball, their hearts give out.

I had followed Miss Spence and her boy friend in their Cadillac sedan to a large coral-tinted stucco building, which turned out to be the jai alai headquarters. I had watched Miss Spence leave her boy friend at the player's gate and enter the auditorium. I had tagged along behind her.

Now I was sitting beside her on a plush seat in the front row of the first of the tiers behind the wire screen, looking down into the floodlit cac*ha.*

Four energetic young Spaniards were dashing about the floor slamming the almost invisible ball back and forth, and performing acrobatic miracles. The crowd seemed to be getting a big bang out of them, but I was more interested in Miss Spence.

She had spread out on the flat plush top of the balcony wall a

program, a pair of binoculars, her hand-bag, a carton of cigarettes and her orange scarf. The heady perfume of No. 5 Chanel brooded over her nick-nacks, herself, and of course, me.

Sitting so close to her—the seats were cut on economical lines—I could feel a subtle warmth from her body, and her perfume had a distinct effect on me. I wondered vaguely what she would do if I enfolded her in a Charles Boyer embrace.

The four Spaniards finished their game and walked off the court to a scattering of applause. They looked jaded and hot. If I'd been in their place I would have been carried off on a stretcher, with a dewy-eyed nurse in attendance packing ice around my temples.

There was an interval, and Miss Spence looked around the auditorium as if she expected the rest of the audience to stand up and sing the National Anthem at the sight of her. They didn't.

She looked to her right, and then to her left. As I was on her left, she looked at me. I gave her a sad, coy leer, and hoped it would unhook the disdainful expression on her face. It didn't exactly do that, but it registered enough for her to study me.

I leaned forward confidentially. "They say the elastic shortage has made woman's position in world affairs less secure than it was four years back," I said briskly.

She didn't say "Huh?", but she wanted to. She looked away instead, the way you look when a drunk speaks to you. Then she looked back and caught my grin. She smiled bleakly.

"Reilly's the name," I said. "I'm a playboy with a lot of dough and a yen for red-heads. You'd better scream for help while there's time. I'm considered to be a fast worker."

She looked me over. No smile now. Eyes medium to hard.

"I could handle you without help," she said in a husky voice that sent chills up and down my spine, "and I don't like playboys."

"My mistake," I said, shaking my head. "I missed out on psychology when I worked my way through college. I'd've thought playboys would have been your strong suit. Let's forget it," and I picked up my program and pretended to study it.

She gave me another bleak stare and concentrated on the court below.

Four men had just walked on. One of them was Gomez. You could tell he was the local champ. Not only did the crowd give him a tremendous hand, but the other three players hung back and let him scoop the limelight. He was full of bounce and arrogance. I watched him wave to the crowd. He certainly had something to be arrogant about. I've never seen such a specimen of a he-man. He looked in our direction and gave Miss Spence a special wave. She ignored him, so I waved for her, just for the hell of it. He didn't seem to appreciate the gesture.

Miss Spence's mouth tightened, but she didn't say anything.

The four men were now in a huddle in the middle of the court, testing the pelot*a which had jus*t been thrown in. Then they broke up and went to their positions.

"Do these guys get paid to play this sissy game?" I asked out of the corner of my mouth.

"What makes you think you're so tough?" she snapped back, before she remembered her dignity.

"Give me a chance and I'll show you," I said.

She leaned forward and looked down at the players. Her eyes brooded sudden death.

Gomez served. I'll say this for him, he could certainly sling a mean pelota. *The ba*ll whizzed through the air, struck the front wall and shot back, hugging the wall and buzzing like an outsized hornet. One of the other players turned into the side wall and took three quick steps up its perpendicular height, like a man running up a short flight of stairs. He trapped the ball in his *cesta,* dropped back and slammed the ball away. White figures darted about the court, arms reached out, the ball whizzed to and fro. Gomez did all the things you'd expect a champ to do, and did them well. His stamina was terrifying. The score moved quickly. It looked a walk-over

for him.

I gave Miss Spence a sidelong look. She was watching the game with a bored disdainful expression on her face as if she knew what was going to happen, and didn't care if and when it did happen.

I remembered what the hall porter had said about her flopping at the drop of a hat. I wondered if it had to be a certain kind of a hat or whether any hat would do. I wished I'd asked for further details.

"Before long that side of beef will be looking for you," I said softly. "Suppose you and me walk out on him? I could show you the moon. If you don't like moons, I'll show you my tattoo marks instead."

Her long, slender, red-tipped fingers tapped on the binocular case.

"I still don't like playboys," she said, and looked away.

Gomez had smashed his *cesta.* Scowling, he signalled time out, and went over to a Negro attendant who strapped a new basket on his hand.

I looked around to make sure no one was paying us any attention. No one was. I made my hand into a fist and slugged Miss Spence just above her hip bone. She rocked, and breath whistled through her nose.

"Maybe you like tough guys better?" I said, smiling at her.

She didn't look at me, but her nose was pinched and her eyes like holes in a mask. She gathered up her junk off the balcony wall and stood up.

"Show me the moon," she said in a brittle hard voice, and pushed past the spectators to the gangway.

I followed her out, accompanied by a storm of cheering. I guessed Gomez had taken the final tan to, and I'd launched Miss Spence just in time.

The dignified doorman signalled for her car as soon as he saw her coining. By the time we had reached the revolving doors the black and chromium Cadillac was lined up, waiting.

The doorman gave me a hard look as he handed Miss Spence into the car. She left the driving

seat vacant, and I slid under the wheel. We drifted away with the smoothness of a falling leaf, and with less noise.

I drove fast to Lancing Avenue. She didn't say anything during the drive, and she sat stiff and straight, looking at the road ahead, her big white teeth gnawing her underlip.

I stopped outside the big apartment block, opened the door and got out. She got out too. We walked across the lobby, and as I passed the hall porter I winked at him. He stared back as if he was seeing a

mirage.

We rode up to the fourth floor in an automatic elevator, and walked along the broad corridor to apartment 466. We didn't speak or look at each other. The atmosphere was loaded with an off-key excitement.

She unlocked the door and we went into a big room full of apricot and chromium furniture. I shut the door, tossed my hat on a chair and faced her.

She looked at me from the fireplace. Her disdainful expression was still hooked to her face, but her eyes were expectant, bright.

"Come here," she said, almost thickly.

I crossed the room and put my hands on her hip-bones. *I sm*iled at her.

"Hold me close, you beast," she said.

I put my arms around her loosely at first. Her hair had a harsh feeling against my face. I tightened my arms and pulled her against me. Her mouth felt hard against mine, but after a while her lips opened. She was shivering.

"Tough guy," she said softly, her breath going into my mouth.

"What was Herrick to you?" I asked.

Her body stiffened in my arms and her breath made a harsh sound. Her head pulled back until her eyes, wide open, were staring at me.

"Who are you?" she asked, in a soft dull voice.

"Chester Cain," I said.

Her face fell to pieces. She pushed away, white, her eyes vacant, blank. I let her go

"Who?"

"Chester Cain."

Slowly she got herself m hand. Her eyes roved around the room, lit on the telephone, lingered, then came back to me.

"Sit down," I said. "I want to talk to you."

She wandered towards the telephone. A gentle hissing sound came

from between her tightlylocked teeth.

"I don't want to talk to you." she managed to jerk out, in grabbed it. She struck at me with her nails. I let go of the telephone and grabbed her wrist, twisting it. She was surprisingly strong. We swayed, and she tried to claw me with her free hand. I ducked my head, and she missed. I expected her to scream, but she didn't, she fought silently, panting a little, her eyes glowing, her mouth working.

We scuffed up the rugs, and did a lot of tramping and shuffling, but I worked her over to the divan and then trapped her ankle and pushed.

She hit the divan and bounced up, but I flung her down again. She kicked me on the shin, gave me a punch in the face and tried to bite my jugular. I cursed her gently and went into a clinch with her. She writhed, twisted and scratched. We were both panting. She butted me in the eye with the top of her head.

I said, "The hell with this," flung her off and stood back. I pulled my gun on her. "Let's skip it," I went on, "or I'll blow a hole in you."

She glared up at me, her eyes savage, but the gun seemed to cool her.

"Stay put, sister," I said, drawing up a chair. I sat down.

She looked me over, and then flopped back on the divan. I'd torn her shirt and a shoulder peeped through. It was a nice shoulder, white and firm.

"You think I killed Herrick," I said, "but I didn't."

She continued to eye me savagely, and said nothing.

"Killeano's mob killed him, and tried to pin it on me," I went on.

"You killed him all right," she said, and added some fancy names. Her language would have turned a stevedore pale.

"Use your head," I said. "I've just arrived here. I never saw Herrick before until I met him in the Casino for a couple of minutes. He asked me to get out of town because he thought I'd cause trouble, and Killeano made that the excuse for killing him and framing me. Can't you see how simple it is? Why should I want to kill Herrick? Think, Tutz, work on it. If you were Killeano and you wanted Herrick out of the way, wouldn't you spring the killing when a guy with my reputation blows into town? It was a gift."

She looked doubtful.

"Killeano wanted him out of the way all right," she muttered. "It could be, but I don't believe it."

I told her the story, how Speratza had invited me to the

Casino, how Miss Wonderly had been detailed to look after me, how I'd seen Flaggerty watching us, and the whole works. She sat watching me, and the angry bitterness seeped out of her eyes.

"All right," she said, shrugging. "I'm the sucker, so you didn't kill him."

"I didn't kill him," I said. "But I'm in a jam. You can help me out."

She raised her eyebrows. "Why should I?"

"Suppose you tell me," I said, smiling at her. "What was Herrick to you?"

She swung off the divan and went over to the big cocktail cabinet.

"I'm keeping out of this," she said, taking out two glasses and pouring whisky. She came over and handed me one, looked down at me, and smiled coldly. "You're tough, all right," she said. "I feel like I've been fed through a mangle."

I pulled her down on my lap. She was a big armful, but I handled her.

"Let's be friends," I said. "You liked Herrick, didn't you?"

She pushed away from me and stood up.

"Cut that stuff right out," she said. "I'm not quite a sap."

I drank some whisky, lit a cigarette and shrugged.

"I could beat it out of you," I said, giving her the cold eye.

"Try," she said, sitting on the divan.

"I've got a better idea," I said. "I'll have a talk with your pal Gomez. He'll be interested to know you sexed me up to this room."

That threw a scare into her.

"You dare!" she snapped, jumping to her feet.

"Come on, be nice."

"Herrick paid me to play the tables at the Casino," she said, after a moment's hesitation. "I don't know why, so don't ask me. He always took the money I'd won and gave me other notes in exchange."

I stared at her.

"Why did he do that?" I said.

She was just going to say she didn't know, when the door jerked open and Gomez walked in.

Chapter Three
GUNFIRE

1

A POLICE siren wailed in the still night air. Car tyres bit gravel. Doors slammed. Feet pounded on concrete.

I stood in the shadow of the wall facing the rear exit of Miss Spence's apartment block. It wasn't a particularly good place to be in with a flock of buttons buzzing around, but I'd been in worse places.

The alley was narrow and sealed at one end. The other end, opening on to the front drive, was lit by a white-blue overhead lamp.

I held the Luger in my right fist, and edged along the shadows. I came to the dead end, looked up. A couple of feet above me I could see the dark sky and the stars. I looked back down the alley. A flat, capped figure was peering around the corner of the wall. He couldn't see me, but I could see him.

He was very cautious, but I could have drilled him between the eyes without buying myself a truss. He seemed shy of showing me any more of himself. Maybe he thought his head was made of bullet-proof steel. Maybe it was.

I went down on one knee, waited.

He did exactly what I thought he would do. He pulled a flash and sent a long bright beam of light in search of me.

The roar of the Luger rolled around the narrow alley, bounced off the walls. The cop's flash disintegrated; darkness settled down again.

I had about sixty seconds to get moving before he recovered his nerve. I moved.

The top of the wall was gritty under my hands. I was glad I'd learned the trick of rolling over walls instead of sitting astride them. I was dropping into the far-side darkness when the cop opened up with a chopper. Slugs threw up a little cloud of mortar and brick dust six feet above my head. I didn't wait.

Beyond the wall was an expanse of trees, shrubs and darkness. I guessed it was the garden of the apartment block. I melted into the darkness; kept edging to my right, where I knew I'd eventually come out to the main street.

There was much shouting in the front drive. Heads peeped cautiously out of windows. The chopper continued to grind away. No one was taking chances.

I kept on. The Army certainly did a swell job in teaching me how to act like a Red Indian. Sitting Bull had nothing on me. Moving through the shrubs and trees, I made no more noise than a ghost and was a lot less visible.

The night was now full of police sirens, some near, some distant, some almost too faint to hear. There seemed a lot of Law on the move.

I reached the wall surrounding the garden as some bright boy decided to turn on a floodlight. I had just pulled myself up and was lying on top of the wall when the lights came on. I felt like a nudist in a subway on a Saturday in the rush-hour.

Enough artillery opened up to slaughter an army. Slugs hummed and buzzed. One of them nicked my sleeve. I dropped into the street faster than a lizard.

A cop from across the street took a pot-shot at me as I zigzagged along the sidewalk. I took a pot-shot at him. He fell on his knees, clasping his wrist. He yelled blue murder.

I got into my stride. Maybe I did touch the ground twice in my sprint for a friendly archway, but I doubt it. The archway led to a big house that loomed white above high white walls, capped with red tiles that reflected the moonlight.

Bullets skipped by me, struck sparks from the road. I reached the archway, ducked under cover. I was breathing like an old man with asthma, sweat ran down my face. Keeping close to the protecting wall, I looked into the street. Men moved, darted for cover, edging nearer to me. The street was lousy with cops.

I drew a bead on one of them. The slug passed through his hat, and he fell down, half-dead with fright.

I ducked back as soon as I'd fired. Three choppers opened up, and for the next three minutes death hung in the air. I let them blaze away, sneaked backwards, took the bend of the wall, and did another sprint. I was over another wall into another garden before they had made up their

minds that it'd be safe to advance,

I was getting tired of this cat-and-mouse business. Instead of climbing the next wall I turned towards the house. It was a big one with a wide verandah overlooking the garden. No lights showed.

I kicked in a window, entered a room that smelt of cigar smoke and perfume. I crossed the room, opened the door and stepped into a passage.

There was a man and a woman in the passage, standing against the partition wall, out of the way of flying glass and slugs.

"Hello." I said, smiling at them. "How are you liking the circus ?

The man was tall and beefy with a red face and a military moustache. His eyes were hard and stupid, his neck thick. The woman was a dark, nicely moulded trick in an interesting Grecian affair—— black crepe with gold bands crossed high on the bodice and double gold bands around the hem. She was about thirty-five, and there was a wordly look in her slaty eyes that I like to see in women of thirty-five.

The red-faced guy stiffened his backbone after the first shock of seeing me had passed. He growled deep in his throat, started a ponderous swing that a battleship could have dodged.

I let the swing sail over my head and ruin a lot of air in the passage. Then I pushed the Luger into his fat ribs.

"Skip it," I said. "You'd be better at the ballet."

His red face went a waxen white.

I looked at the woman. She hadn't turned a hair. She looked back at me, her eyes interested, unafraid.

"Think of the fun you'll have telling your friends," I went on to the man. "Chester Cain passed this way. You could even put a plaque on the outside of the house."

They didn't say anything, but the man had difficulty in breathing.

"Would you both go into one of these rooms?" I said, jerking my head to a line of doors. "I'm as harmless as a spinster aunt so long as no one crowds me."

I manoeuvred them into a front room, made them sit down. The furniture was as heavy and as dull as the man's face. The woman continued to eye me with interest.

I put my gun away to ease the atmosphere, peered out of the window.

Searchlights roamed the sky, car lights lit up the street, flat caps moved back and forth.

"I'll stick around," I said, sitting down so I could watch the two. "That reception committee still looks like business." I lit a cigarette, then remembered my manners, offered the pack to the woman. She took one, giving me a long, curious stare as she did so.

"Jill!" the man spluttered. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"Why shouldn't I smoke?" she asked in a tired voice.

He opened and shut his mouth, then scowled at her.

I struck a match and lit her cigarette. I had an idea at the back of my mind that I might have fun with her.

We sat around while the cops tramped up and down, poked into bushes and scared hell out of each other.

Maybe the red-faced man thought I was harmless without my gun in my hand, maybe his manhood nudged him. He suddenly bounded out of his chair and came at me like a charging rhino.

I had my gun out by the time he arrived, but he was coming so fast he hadn't time to apply his brakes. I cracked him on top of his skull and he stretched out on the carpet.

"I'm sorry," I said to the woman. "But you saw how it was."

She looked down at the mountain of flesh without a great show of interest or distress.

"Have you killed him?" she asked.

She sounded as if she hoped I had.

I shook my head. "No."

"He won the Purple Heart," she said, looking at me. "I wonder if you know what that means? He likes to explain the battle to people."

"You mean he moves the salt cellar and the spoons and the pepper-box, and shows dispositions, manoeuvres and advances?"

"That is the general idea," she said, lifting her elegant shoulders.

I looked down at the red-faced man and thought she couldn't I have much fun with him.

"Yeah," I said. "These boys who live in the past are hard to take."

She didn't say anything.

A double knock on the front door brought me to my feet.

"That sounds like the Law," I said, twirling the Luger.

"Are you scared?" she asked, staring at me. "I wouldn't have thought anything would scare you."

"You'd be surprised," I returned, grinning. "Spiders give me goose pimples." I opened the room door. "Come on," I said. "I want you to talk to the Law. You won't throw an ing-bing?"

"No, I won't do that," she said. "I suppose if I tell them you're here, you'll shoot me?"

I shook my head. "I'll have to shoot the coppers, and that'd be a shame," I said.

We went down the passage to the front door. I stood against the wall in the shadows where I could see without being seen.

"You don't want to be told what to say, do you?" I asked.

"I don't think so," she said, opening the door.

There were a couple of cops standing on the front step. When they saw her they saluted.

"Everything okay, Mrs. Whitly?" one of them asked. His voice was loaded with respect.

"Except the noise," she said calmly. "Is it necessary to shoot so much? Surely one man can't be as dangerous as you make him sound."

"He's a killer, ma'am," the cop said, breathing heavily. "The Lieutenant's not risking lives. We shoot first and talk after."

"Very interesting," she said, in a bored voice. "Well, I hope it stops soon and I can go to bed."

"We'll catch him, ma'am," the cop said, sticking out his chest. "But

don't worry, we reckon he's some way from here by now."

She closed the door, and we stood in the dim light, listening to the cops as they pounded their way up the street.

She fingered a ruby and gold bracelet, glanced at me.

"Is that Mr. Whitly?" I asked, jerking my thumb in the direction of the room we had just left.

She nodded. "Charles Whitly, the son of John Whitly, the millionaire," she said, in a hard, toneless voice. "We are very respectable people, and even the police salute us. Our friends are very respectable too. We own three motor-cars, six racehorses, a yacht, a private beach, a library of expensive books that no one reads, and lots of other very expensive and useless things. My husband plays polo ..."

"And he won the Purple Heart," I said, shaking my head. "It sounds wonderful."

Her lip curled. "It does. It was when I married him."

"Yeah," I said. "Well, it isn't my idea of fun." 'It hasn't turned out to be mine either," she said, examining the bracelet.

We could go on like this all night, so I opened the front door. I guess I'll be running along," I said. "I enjoyed meeting you, and I'm sorry about the expensive things, and I'm sorry about hitting your husband on the head."

"Don't be sorry about that. It'll give him another topic of conversation," she said, and swayed towards me.

"I'm still sorry," I said. Our faces were close.

"You don't find life dull, do you?" she asked. I put my arm around her and kissed her. We stayed like that for a minute or so, then I pushed her gently away.

"Life's fine," I said, and went down the steps of the house. I didn't look back.

2

I ran the Mercury convertible into the wooden garage next to Tim Duval's place on the waterfront. I cut the engine and the lights, shut the garage doors and walked over to the house.

Searchlights still waved over Paradise Palms. Maybe they thought I was hiding in the sky. Every now and then a nervous cop would let off his gun. The activity was now a couple of miles away, and right where I was seemed quiet enough.

I rapped on the door of the squat, faded house and waited. There was a long pause, then a woman's voice called from an overhead window, "Who is it?"

"Tim around?" I asked, stepping back and peering at the white blob that looked down at me.

"No."

"This is Cain," I said.

"Wait," the woman said, and a moment or so later the front door opened.

"Where's Tim?" I asked, trying to see the woman in the darkness.

"You'd better come in," she said, standing to one side.

"Who are you?"

"Tim's wife." There was pride in her voice.

I wondered if a bunch of Law was waiting for me in the house, I didn't think so. I entered, followed her along the passage to a room at the back of the house.

The room was square-shaped and lit by a paraffin lamp. A fishing net hung in folds along one of the walls. Slickers, a south-wester, rubber boots hung near it. There was a table, three straight-backed chairs, a plush arm-chair and a cupboard. There were other odds and ends. The place was clean. Somehow the room managed to look cosy and like home.

Mrs. Duval was a big woman, long-legged, big-handed, big-hipped,

still handsome. She looked a young forty-five, and her red-brown face was strong. Black hair, without a strand of white, capped her head like painted tar.

She eyed me over. Her china-blue eyes, deep-set, were thoughtful.

"Tim said you were all right," she said. "I hope he knows what he is talking about."

I grinned. "He's trusting," I said. "But I'm harmless enough."

She nodded briefly. "You'd better sit," she said, and went over to the stove. "I guessed you'd be out here in a while. I kept something hot for you."

I found I was hungry.

"Swell," I said, sitting down.

She threw a clean white cloth over one end of the table, set a knife and fork and then went back to the stove.

"You men are all alike," she said, without bitterness. "You have your fun, and then come back to be fed."

"That what Tim does?"

"You do it too, don't you?"

I looked at the T-bone steak she had set before me, hitched up my chair.

"I've had a lot of fun tonight," I said, beginning to eat. "Where's Tim?"

"He went over to Cudco Key."

"Take the boat?"

"He rowed. He said you might want the boat."

"That's a long haul."

"He'll make it."

I tapped my plate with my knife. "I appreciate this."

She nodded, then said: "Jed Davis is out the back waiting for you. Do you want to see him?"

I frowned, then I remembered.

"The newspaper guy?"

She nodded.

"Is he okay?"

"He's a friend of Tim's," she said. "Tim picks bums for friends, but he won't bite."

I laughed. "I'll see him," I said.

She went away.

I was half through my steak when the door opened again and a mountain of man came in. His face was round, fat and purple. His eyes small and reckless. He wore a tweed suit that looked as if he hadn't taken it off since he bought it, and that had happened a long time ago. A battered slouch hat, slightly too small for him, rested on the back of his head. He chewed a dead cigar between small, even white teeth.

He stared at me, then came further into the room, closed the door.

" 'Lo front page news," he said.

"Hullo yourself," I said, continuing to eat.

He took off his hat and combed his hair with a little ivory comb, grunted, put his hat on again and sat down in the plush arm-chair. It creaked as it took the strain.

"You certainly started something in this burg," he said, taking the cigar from between his teeth and examining it through half-closed eyes. "I feel like a war correspondent again."

"Yeah," I said.

He looked at the table. "Didn't she give you a drink?"

"I didn't miss it," I said.

He climbed laboriously out of the chair. "Must have a drink," he growled. "Hetty's a swell cook, and a good woman, but she just doesn't understand that guys need a drink." He opened a cupboard and produced a black unlabelled bottle. He found two glasses and poured whisky into them. He gave me a glass and went back to the chair with

the other. "Clot in your bloodstream," he said, waving the glass at me.

We drank.

"How long do you reckon to keep up this shindig?" he asked.

"Until I've found Herrick's killer."

"So you didn't kill him?"

"No. I was the fall guy. It was a political killing."

He took another drink, rolled the liquor round in his mouth before swallowing it. "Killeano?"

"What do you think?"

"Well, yes; it'd suit him to knock Herrick off."

"Your rag interested one way or the other?"

"The Editor's too fond of life. These boys are tough eggs to monkey with. We stay neutral."

"Mean anything to you personally?"

He looked sleepy. "Well, if some guy came along and bust this Administration wide open, I'd have something to write about, providing the bust was complete. I'd do what I could to get the story, but I'd have to play it close to my chest."

I didn't say anything.

He eyed me narrowly, then went on. "Killeano's a louse. But he's got the town in his pocket, and now Herrick's out of the way anything could happen. He's well in the saddle, and it'll be a hell of a job to unstick him."

"Depends how it's played," I said, lighting a cigarette. "If I can get the right information, I'll crack Killeano."

He nodded slowly. "What kind of information?"

"Did Herrick work on his own?"

"Practically. He and Frank Brodey. Their organization was small: too small."

"Who's Brodey?"

"Herrick's lawyer. He's at 458 Bradshaw Avenue. He lives with his daughter."

"Will he take over from Herrick?"

Davis shook his head.- "Not a chance. He ain't built for a fight with Killeano. No, I guess he'll stay put and let Killeano walk it."

I made a note of the address.

"Ever thought why Herrick went so much to the Casino?" I asked.

"Yeah, but it didn't get me anywhere. He was trying to turn up some dirt, but whether he got it or not I wouldn't know."

"I think he did and that's why he was rubbed," I said. "Ever heard of Lois Spence?"

"Ever heard of Mae West?" he returned, grinning. "Lois is famous around here."

"Killeano know her?"

"Even I know her. She's balanced that light a breath of wind would blow her over."

"So she knew Killeano?"

"Yeah, about two years ago they were like that." He crossed his two fingers. "That was before Killeano took over the town. When he got into power he ditched her. Had to, I guess. You can't run a town and Lois at the same time: both are full-time jobs."

"Herrick went around with her too?"

"Yeah, but there was nothing to that, although some mudslingers tried to make something out of it. My guess is he was using her to dig up dirt on Killeano, and she strung him along, took his dough and gave him nothing."

"He paid her to play the tables at the Casino."

That surprised him. He stared at me, lifted his hat, combed his hair while he thought. "Why did he do that?" he asked at last, putting the comb away.

"He took the dough she had won and gave her other notes in exchange. Looks like he suspected the Casino of passing dud notes."

Davis brooded. "Well, that's an idea," he said, "but it wouldn't be easy, and no one's complained."

"It might be worth checking. Could you do that?"

He nodded. "I guess I could. I go there off and on. I could sniff around."

"If you knew what you were looking for, it might not be so tough."

"Well, I can dig a little."

"This guy Gomez seems a tough egg."

Davis grinned. "I'll say. You met him? Take my tip and| keep out of his way. He's dynamite."

"I've met him," I said, shrugging. "I was with Lois when he blew in. It took my reputation and the Luger to hold him. I thought I'd have to shoot him he was so mad, but Lois grabbed him and I got out. He was the one who started the Law on the move."

"He's a bad guy," Davis said, shaking his head. "He doesn't I like anyone hanging around Lois unless it's strictly business. One guy thought he was soft. Gomez shot him. It was fixed to look like suicide, but I know how it happened."

"Kind of jealous, eh?"

"He certainly is, and as hot-blooded as a stove."

"What do you know about a cat-house along the waterfront? Who owns it?"

"Speratza."

"Sure?"

Davis nodded. "It's the only joint of its kind in town. He must have plenty of protection to keep it open, and he makes a good thing out of it."

"Huh-uh," I said, giving myself another drink. I passed the bottle to Davis. "And Flaggerty? Anything on him?"

"He's Killeano's stooge. He puts up a front, of course, but Killeano pulls the strings; he jumps. There's nothing to him. He's just another crooked cop."

"He helped in Herrick's killing."

Davis paused in pouring his drink. "The hell he did?"

"Yeah," I said. "About Herrick. Was he married?"

"No. He lived in an apartment with a guy called Giles who looked after him. Give you the address if you want it."

"Where?"

"Macklin Avenue. It lies off Bradshaw Avenue. But you won't get anything out of Giles I talked to him. He doesn't know anything.

"Maybe he'll talk to me." I got up. "I guess I'll pay some calls."

"They're still looking for you," Davis reminded me. "And it's getting on for midnight."

"We'll get 'em out of bed."

"We?"

"Sure, I'm going with you. They won't expect me to be with you."

He produced his comb again and ran it through his hair. "Say, that's not such a hot idea," he said. "I gotta keep in the clear. How'd I look if they spotted you with me?"

I smiled at him. "Come on," I said. "You and I are going on a little trip. First we'll go to Macklin Avenue and then Bradshaw. You got a car?"

He nodded.

"Fine. I'll be tucked up in the back under a rug. That way the cops won't worry us and we'll get places."

"I can always say I didn't know you were there," he said, his face brightening. "Okay, let's go."

3

I lay under the rug on the floor of Davis's battered Ford and sweated. Davis sweated too, at least, he said he was sweating. "Gawd!" he exclaimed, "the place is lousy with cops. Any second now they'll start shooting." "That's okay," I said. "They're not likely to hit me. I'm too well protected down here." "But I'm not," Davis grunted. He braked sharply. "That's torn it. They're signalling to me." 'Keep your shirt on," I said, feeling for my gun. "Maybe they want to ask the time. You know what coppers are."

"Quiet!" he hissed dramatically

I relaxed, waited.

Voices came out of the night. Feet scraped on the road. What the hell are you doing out here?" a voice growled into the car.

"Hello, Macey," Davis said. 'I'm just passing through. How's the battle coming? You caught him yet?"

"We will," the voice said. "Where are you going?"

"Home," Davis said. "Think I'll get through?"

"You might, only don't blame me if one of the boys shoots you. The streets aren't healthy."

"You telling me," Davis said. "I've had twenty heart attacks in so many minutes."

The cop laughed. "Well, don't try any speeding. You'll be okay at the top of the road. We've just been through this district. The punk's as good as the invisible man."

"Thanks," Davis said, and eased in his clutch. "Be seeing you."

The car moved on.

"Phew!" Davis said after a while. "I'm shaking like a jelly."

"That shouldn't be hard for you to do," I said. "What's it I look like?"

"He's signalled me through. There're cops all along the street glaring at me, but that's all they're doing. If there are any of them up at

Herrick's place we'd better skip it."

"Have a drink and calm down," I said, sliding the bottle we'd taken from Tim's place over the back of the seat.

Gurgling sounds followed.

"Leave me some," I said sharply.

"You don't need it like I do," Davis said, but he dropped the bottle back. It hit my head.

"Hey!" I said. "Do you want to brain me?"

"I wouldn't mind," Davis replied, accelerating. "You can come out now. The cops are out of sight."

I threw off the rug, sat up, wiping my face. We were in a narrow street lined on each side by neat villas.

"We're just there," Davis said. "Next street."

As I was looking, a big brown Plymouth sedan shot round the corner, and belted down the street towards us. Davis gave ft startled snort and swerved violently to the right. The Plymouth I missed us by a couple of inches, and was gone.

"The crazy loon!" Davis exclaimed. "What's his hurry?"

"Maybe he remembered a heavy date," I said. "Don't let a little thing like that disturb you."

We turned the comer, pulled up outside a small villa.

"This is Herrick's place," Davis said. "Want me to come in?"

I shook my head. "You and me had better not be seen together," I said.

"Yeah," he said, reaching over the back of his seat. He found the bottle and patted it lovingly. "I can keep myself amused."

I left him and walked up the path to the house. No lights showed. I thumbed the bell, waited. Somewhere in the house the bell rang, but no one answered. I rang again, thinking the man, Giles, was asleep. But after five minutes of continuous ringing, I decided no one was home.

Davis stuck his head out of the car window. "Bust down the door," he

said. He sounded a little tight.

I went round to peer in a window. There was enough moonlight to see something of the room. I found myself staring at a large desk. The drawers were open, papers were scattered on the floor. I looked closer and saw an arm-chair had been ripped to pieces.

"Hey," I called to Davis. "Come here."

Muttering under his breath, he heaved his bulk out of the car and joined me.

He peered through the window, saw what I had seen, stepped back.

"Looks like someone's been going over the joint," he said, producing his little ivory comb. He combed his hair thoughtfully. "That's good liquor of Tim's," he went on. "I think I'll have another shot. My nerves are kind of unsteady."

I tapped, broke a small section of glass near the window catch, opened the window.

"Hey," Davis said, his eyes round. "What do you think you're doing?"

"I'm going in there to take a look," I said.

"I'll stick around and toot on the horn if any buttons show," Davis said, moving towards the car.

"And leave that bottle alone," I said.

I had a look round the room. Someone had gone over it carefully. There wasn't anything in one piece. Even the stuffing in the chairs and settee had been hauled out and sifted through.

I went over the house. Each room had been treated in the same way.

Upstairs in the front bedroom I came upon a man in white pyjamas. He was lying half across the bed, the back of his head had been smashed in. I touched his hand. He was still warm; but he was dead. It looked as if the killer had surprised him in bed, and had bust him before he could raise the alarm.

I went down the stairs, opened the front door, called Davis.

"Come upstairs," I said.

We went up. Davis looked at the man.

"That's Giles," he said, making a little grimace. "Hell! We'd better get out of here."

"He hasn't been dead more than a few minutes," I said, staring down at the dead man. "Think that Plymouth's anything to do with this?"

"I wouldn't know," Davis said, moving to the head of the stairs. "All I know is if Flaggerty finds us here, we're dead pigeons."

"I guess you're right at that."

We went down the stairs and out of the house.

The night was quiet now. The searchlights had ceased to I grope in the sky. Gunfire no longer sounded. It was hot and still.

We got in the car.

"You're passing up a good story," I said, looking at Davis with a grin.

"I'll wait until they find him," he said, starting the engine. "I'm not sticking my glass chin out by telling them he's there. They might tie me to it."

He let in the clutch and we shot away from the kerb.

4

"Is this where Brodey hangs out?" I asked, as Davis stopped the car in front of a big house on

Macklin Avenue.

"Across the way," Davis said, pointing. "I'm not parking before any more death houses. Jeese! That was a dumb trick. If a copper had seen us come out——"

"Forget it," I said, getting out of the car. "Show me the place, and don't get so excited."

"Excited? For crying out loud! I don't like running into corpses that haven't been turned up by the cops. It's too dangerous."

We crossed the road. Somewhere out of sight a car engine roared.

Davis paused in mid-stride.

"Hear that?" he said, clutching my arm.

"Come on," I said, and started forward.

Brodey's house was big, and it stood back from the street. . The garden was full of palms and tropical shrubs. It was difficult to see much of the house from where we were.

As we approached the front gates, which stood open, we heard the car coming down the drive. We ducked back into the shadows. The brown Plymouth sedan shot into the street, belted away. It was out of sight before we got over our surprise.

I had caught a glimpse of a man who was driving, but I couldn't see much of him. The car was fitted with curtains which happened to billow out as the car passed me. That was how I saw the man; Davis didn't see him at all.

"Looks bad for Brodey," I said, and began to run up the drive.

Davis panted along behind me. "Think he's been knocked off ?" he groaned.

"Looks like it, doesn't it?" I said. "Same car. Same hurry to get away.

They're after something pretty important."

A turn in the drive brought us to a big Spanish house that was in darkness.

"If they've killed Brodey, there'll be a hell of a stink," Davis gasped, following me up the steps.

"They're sitting pretty," I said, "so long as they can pin it on me; and that's what they'll do."

"Then what the hell am I doing trailing around with you?" Davis demanded. "If you're the killer, what am I?"

"Ask the judge . . . he'll tell you."

I touched the front door; it swung open.

"Looks bad," I said.

"I'm not coming in," Davis said, backing away. "I'm scared, Cain. This is getting too deep for me."

"Take it easy," I said. "Stick around. Don't run out on me now."

"I'll stick, but I ain't coming in."

"What's the matter with you? This may turn out to be front page news."

"I'd sooner find it without you being around," Davis said, shaking his head. "If they're going to pin it on you, they'll book me as a material witness or something."

I left him arguing with himself, and entered the dark lobby. This time I'd brought a flashlight from the car. I looked into the various rooms that led off the lobby. They were undisturbed, but when I came to the last door at the end of the passage, I found what I expected to find. The room was Brodey's study. It was big and well-furnished and equipped like an office. Here, a search had been made. Papers were strewn on the floor, desk drawers Herrick's place. The chairs hadn't been ripped open, nor had the pictures been taken off the walls.

There was no one in the room, and I stood looking round, wondering what to do next. It was a big house to go over; I didn't know how many servants were sleeping upstairs: but I had to know if Brodey was dead.

As I turned to the door I heard or sensed something which made me feel I wasn't alone. I snapped off the flashlight and stood motionless, listening. I heard nothing. The room was as black as tar. I eased the Luger out, and held it down by my side. Still no sound. I crept cautiously to the door, reached it. Nothing happened. I stood listening. No developments. I touched the door, peeped into the passage. It was dark out there and silent. I kept still, listened, and tried to see through the darkness. I stayed there a long minute, listening. There wasn't a sound in the house, nor in the street outside, yet I was sure I wasn't alone. I could sense the presence of someone, and that someone wasn't far off.

I waited, hoping whoever it was out there had weaker nerves than I had. It was a nasty business standing half in and half out of the room in darkness and silence, waiting for someone's nerve to crack.

Then I heard something. It was an almost soundless sound, and at first I couldn't place it. After listening carefully I realized it was someone breathing near me. It gave me a spooked feeling.

Slowly I raised my flash until it was pointing in the direction of the breathing. Then I pressed the button, ready to jump if someone opened up with a gun.

The harsh beam of the flashlight lit up the passage. There was a choked gasp of terror which made the hair on the back of my neck bristle. I found myself staring at a girl crouched against the passage wall. She was slight, young, about eighteen, pretty in an immature way; chestnut hair, brown eyes. She was wearing a black and gold kimono and the trousers of her pyjamas were dark blue silk.

She stayed motionless, her eyes empty with terror, her mouth formed in a soundless scream.

I guessed she was Brodey's daughter.

"Miss Brodey," I said sharply. "It's all right. I'm sorry if I scared you. I'm looking for your father."

She shivered and her eyes rolled up. Before I could move she had slipped to the floor. I bent over her. She was out cold.

I slipped the Luger back into its holster and picked her up.

She was thin and light, and I could feel her ribs under the silk kimono. I carried her into the study and put her on the settee.

Silence brooded over the house. I wondered if there was anyone else in the place.

I went to the front door, but Davis wasn't in sight. I found him by the car, his head back and

the bottle to his mouth. I moved silently up to him and tapped him on the shoulder.

"Got you!" I said in a gruff voice.

Davis didn't jump more than a couple of feet, and hollered, "Yow-ee!" He nearly swallowed the bottle. I took it away from him with one hand, thumped him on his beefy back with the other. After a while he recovered from his choking fit.

"You loon," he gasped. "You scared me silly."

"Come on," I said. "I want you."

"Don't tell me you've dug up another corpse?" he asked, alarmed.

"Not yet, but Brodey's daughter has thrown an ing-bing. She's nice, and she's got on a kimono."

"Japanese style, eh?" he said, interested. "Well, maybe I'd better come at that."

Miss Brodey was lying where I had left her. She looked small and pathetic.

"The idea is to put her head between her knees and a key on the back of her neck," Davis said, combing his hair.

"That's for nose bleed, you dope," I said. "At least, the key part of it is."

"Well, give her some Scotch," he advised. "I bet Brodey's got a bottle somewhere around."

He found it after a short, intensive search, took a long swig himself.

"Not bad," he said, shaking his head at the bottle. "Lawyers always do themselves well."

I sampled the Scotch too. He was right.

"Well, come on," Davis said. "This is no time for boozing. Let's get

this kid on her feet. Scraggy little thing, ain't she?"

"She'll ripen," I said, and lifted the girl's head. I forced whisky between her clenched teeth. It brought her round after a while, and her eyes fluttered at me.

"Bet she asks where she is," Davis muttered. "They always do."

But she didn't. She took one look at me and dived off the settee to the wall. She gave us the fright of our lives. "Now take it easy," I said.

"Let me handle this," Davis said, "She knows me." He advanced towards the girl with a kindly leer on his fat face. "Hi, Miss Brodey, remember me? Jed Davis of the Morni*ng Star?* We heard there was trouble up here and blew in. What's wrong, baby?"

She stared at him, tried to speak.

"Now don't get upset," he went on gently. "Come and sit down and tell me all about it."

"He's taken him away," she blurted out in a thin, hysterical voice. "He made him go with him."

Davis led her back to the settee. "All right, kid," he said. "We'll fix it. Just sit down and tell us about it."

She gave me a scared look. I stood behind her so she couldn't see me. Davis was patting her hand, clucking over her. I was surprised at his technique.

He got the story out of her inch by inch. She told us she'd been asleep, and voices coming from her father's study had woken her. She'd gone down. The study door was ajar and she peeped in. Brodey was up against the wall with his hands in the air. A man in a brown suit was threatening him with a gun. She heard the brown man say: "Okay, if that's the way you want to play it. Come on, we'll go for a ride." She wanted to get help, but she was too scared to move. The brown man hustled Brodey out of the room. It was dark in the passage and neither of them saw her. They went out the front door, and a moment or so later she heard a car drive away. Then I showed up.

Davis and I exchanged glances.

"Seen this guy before?" Davis asked.

She shook her head. She was shivering with shock and looked as if

she'd pass out any moment.

Davis tried to make her take another drink, but she wouldn't; she kept saying: "You must get him back. Please. Don't sit there. Get him back."

"We'll get him back," Davis assured her, "but we must know who took him. What was this guy like?"

"Short and thickset," she said, putting her hands over her eyes. "He was horrible—like an ape."

"Did he have a scar down the side of his face?" Davis asked, stiffening.

She nodded.

"Know him?" I asked.

"I guess so," Davis said, his eyes popping. "Sounds like Bat Thompson, Killeano's strong man. He's one of the tough boys from Detroit, and make no mistake, brother, he's tough."

"Know where we can find him?"

"I know where he hangs out," Davis said. "But we don't want to find him. He's a guy best left alone."

"Where does he hang out?"

"Sam Sansotta's gambling joint."

"Okay. Let's see how tough he is."

Davis sighed. "I knew you were going to say that. You're a nice reckless sort of a punk for me to fall in with."

"Get the police," Miss Brodey said, crying.

"We'll get everybody," Davis said, patting her shoulder. "Now go to bed and wait. We'll get your poppa back for you."

We left her sitting on the settee, her eyes like great holes in a sheet.

"Listen, Cain," Davis said, when we reached the car. "You ain't really going to call on Bat, are you?"

"Why not? We want Brodey, don't we?"

"Listen, Bat'll tear your ears off. He's a bad hombre. You're not going to scare him."

"I can try," I said, getting into the car.

"My pal," Davis said, but he got in too.

5

Sansotta's gambling joint was at the far end of the coast road, leading out of Paradise Palms. It was a squat building, three storeys high; a broad verandah, on which stood tables and chairs, circled the building. Beyond, two large glass doors gave on to the main hall.

Although it was after one o'clock, the place was still lit up. A number of people sat on the verandah, and dancing was going on in the hall.

Davis parked his car on the opposite side of the road, reached for the bottle, swished it round, drained it. He threw the bottle at the sandy beach.

"My need's greater than yours, pal," he said.

I was studying the lay-out of the place. You don't think you're going to walk in there and bring Brodey out, do you?" Davis went on, mopping his face with a not over-clean handkerchief.

"That's the general idea," I said. 'Superman stuff, eh?"

"That's it."

"Well, count me out. I'm too big a target to take Bat on. He's a killer."

"So am I," I reminded him.

He looked at me. "Well, brother, I'll be sitting out here admiring the view. I'll write you a nice obituary when they carry you out. What flowers would you like?"

"You're coming in. I'm a stranger seeing Paradise Palms for the first time, and you're showing me around. Somehow you're going to get me upstairs because that's where Brodey is."

"Oh no," Davis said emphatically. "Not me. I'm staying right here, keeping my nose clean. I'm not easily scared, but that guy Bat sure makes my flesh creep."

I stuck my Luger into his fat ribs. "You're going in," I said, giving him the hard eye, "or I'll make holes in you."

He looked at me, saw I meant business, sighed.

"Well, maybe I'll go buy a drink," he said. "No harm in that, is there?"

He opened the car door and we walked across the road, up the steps into the brightly-lit hall.

No one took any notice of us. We went to the bar. The-barman nodded to Davis and set up a bottle. He seemed to know Davis.

We had a couple of snorts before a thin little man with polished black hair, polished black eyes and a paper-thin mouth came out from behind a curtain and joined us.

" 'Lo, Sansotta," Davis said, tipping his hat. "Here's a pal of mine who's blown in looking for a good time. George, this is Sansotta, I was telling you about."

I nodded to the little man, thinking he looked a tough egg in spite of his size.

"Hi yah," I said. "Glad to know you."

He nodded. His puss didn't reveal anything.

"Nice town you have here," I said, like I thought he owned the burg.

"Fair," he said, looking around the room. His eyes were continually on the move.

I trod on Davis's foot.

He grunted, then said, "Any poker going on tonight? My pal's anxious to lose his roll."

Sansotta looked me over, and then looked at Davis. He raised his eyebrows.

Davis nodded. "He's okay."

"He can go up. They're playing in room 5."

"Thanks," I said, finishing my drink. "Coming?" I said to Davis.

He shook his head. "I'll stick around for a drink or two, then beat it. You can get a taxi back."

"Okay," I said, and started up the stairs.

Half-way up, I glanced back, paused.

Flaggerty appeared in the main doorway. He was still wearing his green gaberdine suit, and a cigar burned unevenly between his teeth. He was scowling as he joined Davis at the bar.

I shot up the stairs and out of sight, glancing back after I'd rounded the corner to make sure he hadn't seen me. He hadn't. Davis was combing his hair, a fixed grin on his face. Flaggerty was buying himself a drink.

I walked along the passage to room 5, listened to the hum of voices from inside and then moved on. There were three other doors in the passage, but I didn't bother with them. I headed for the second lot of stairs.

Half-way up I heard someone coming along the lower passage; I took the remaining stairs three at a time. I found myself in a dimly lit passage with two doors facing me.

Footsteps went along the lower passage, a door opened and then shut.

I stepped over to the first door facing me and listened. Silence. I moved along to the next door, listened. A voice was speaking, but the words were lost. I stood there, my ear to the panel, waited. Then I heard a muffled groan that set my teeth on edge. I was sure Brodey, was in there.

Any moment Sansotta might discover I wasn't in room 5 playing poker. As soon as he'd found that out, he'd be looking for me. If I was going to do anything, I'd have to do it now and fast.

I turned the handle. The door wasn't locked; it gave as I pushed.

I walked in.

On a bed in the corner of the room was a bald-headed man in a grey lounge suit. There was blood on his face and shirt front. One eye was closed and bruised, and a patch of broken skin showed by his right ear where he had been punched. His wrists and ankles were roped to the bed, and he was gagged.

Standing over him was a short, thickset man in a baggy brown suit. He was bow-legged and his battered, apish face was moronic and cruel. He was raising his great hairy fist as I walked in.

"Grab some cloud, Bat," I said.

He stiffened, then without moving his body he looked over I his shoulder. His small pig eyes hardened when he saw me. His right hand moved, but I showed him the Luger.

"I shouldn't, Bat," I said gently. "I'm Cain."

That held him. Slowly he raised his hands to shoulder height. He grinned at me. His teeth were black and broken.

"Hullo, bub," he said.

"Get over to the wall," I said, watching him, "and face it."

"You're my meat, bub," he went on, grinning at me. "Not now, but later. I'm as good with a rod as you."

"We'll try it sometime," I said. "Get over to the wall."

Still grinning, he sidled over to the wall.

"Turn," I said.

He turned.

I stepped up to him and belted him over his head with the gun barrel. I hit him as hard as I could. He slumped down on; his hands and knees, but he wasn't out. He had the hardest head in the world. He squirmed round, grabbed at my legs. He nearly had me over. I kicked him off, hit him again with the butt of the gun. I hit him so hard the gun jumped out of my hand. He stretched out flat.

I cut the ropes that tied Brodey to the bed and sat him up. He fell off the bed before I could catch him. He was out.

As I stooped to pick him up, the door jerked open and Sansotta walked in. He stopped, gaped at me, at Bat; then his hand flashed to his hip pocket.

I let go of Brodey, flung myself at Sansotta's legs. We went down in a squirming heap. He clubbed at my head with his fist, but I wriggled away, caught him a bang under his right eye. His head snapped back, but he was on his feet before I was on mine. He was as fast and as tricky as a lizard.

The Luger had vanished under the bed. Bat was stirring, trying to sit up. Brodey was lying like a dead man a few feet from me. Sansotta jumped me. I caught him round his waist, I dragged him down, belted him about the body.

He tried to fight me off, but my weight was too much for him. He gave a strangled yell, but I had him by the throat. I squeezed.

Green gaberdine trousers came into the room. I threw myself sideways, but I was too late.

Something that felt like the Empire State Building descended on my head.

6

I opened my eyes. Bat grinned at me. "Hullo, bub," he said. "How you feel?" I fingered a tender lump on the back of my head, grimaced. "Lousy," I said. He nodded, looked pleased. "I guessed it," he said. "But it ain't nothing to what's coming to you."

I grunted, and looked around the room. It was fair sized, windowless and contained a bed on which I was lying, and a chair on which Bat was sitting. High up in the ceiling was a naked electric light bulb. The room wasn't clean.

"How long have I been out?" I asked.

Bat grinned again. "Three-four hours," he said, leaning back in his chair. He seemed to regard the whole business as the best joke in the world. "You ain't so tough," he added as an afterthought. His short, greasy hair was matted with blood where I had hit him, but he didn't seem to worry about it.

"Where's Brodey?" I asked.

"Him? They put him somewhere. That guy's nuts. He don't know what's good for him," Bat returned, fishing out a package of cigarettes and lighting one. He tossed the package and a box of matches to me. "Have a smoke, bub, you ain't got so long to live."

I lit a cigarette. "What's cooking?" I asked.

He shrugged. "They'll be along to see you when they're through with Brodey," he told me. "You'll know soon enough."

I wondered what had become of Jed Davis. I hoped he'd ducked out in time.

"Well, well," I said, trying to blow a smoke ring. It didn't come off. "I'm not curious. I'll wait."

He grinned some more. "Don't start anything smart," he said. "I'm as fast with a rod as you are—faster."

I laughed at him. "You've kept it quiet then," I said.

A tiny spark of rage burnt in his pig eyes. "Whatja mean?" he demanded, leaning forward.

"Bat Thompson doesn't mean anything to me," I said. But Chester Cain means plenty to you. Work it out for yourself."

"Yeah?" he said, his face a dusty red. "Listen, I could take you any time with a rod, see?" That's what you say."

"Watch, punk," he said, getting to his feet.

He crouched. There was a blur of white as his hand moved; a .38 sprang into sight. It was a fast, smooth draw. It surprised me.

"How's that?" he asked, twiddling the gun around on his thick finger.

"Do that standing in front of me when I'm heeled, and you'd be a dead pigeon," I said.

"You're a liar," he said, putting the gun away, but there was a look of doubt in his eyes.

"All right, I'm a liar, but I can beat you to the draw easy. I'll tell you why. You waste time. You don't co-ordinate your movements."

"Don't what?" His eyes opened a trifle.

"You're all wrong. Show me again."

He stared at me, his curiosity battling with his rage. Then he set himself, the gun jumped into his hand. It was fast and smooth. I knew I'd have to be extra good to beat him.

"Yeah," I said, "the holster's in the wrong position. I thought that was the trouble. It's too high. You want to sling it lower. You waste time catching at the butt. When you get the rod out you have to lower the barrel before you fire. See ? Wastes time."

"Got it all worked out, ain't you?" he said, staring at the gun. I could see he was impressed. He put the gun back into the holster, adjusted the strap to bring the gun in a slightly lower position. "That right?" he asked.

"I'd make it lower," I said, "but then you're not as tall as I am."

He hesitated, then let the strap out another knotch. The way he had it now was the way I wanted him to have it if I could lay my hands on a gun. The holster was now loose enough to go with the gun when he pulled it, and that'd mean a time lag before he could free the gun.

"Yeah," he said, looking at the way the gun was hanging. "That's

okay." He grinned at me. "You ain't so smart, are you, bub?"

"What the hell?" I said, shrugging. "I still got confidence. I don't murder guys. I give 'em a chance."

He stared at me. "You ain't murdering me," he said, showing his teeth. "I know I'm good."

"To me you're just a tough egg from Detroit, but not tough enough to stay in Detroit."

He was sliding across the room, his great fist set to belt me, when the door opened and Killeano and Flaggerty came in.

Bat paused, dropped his hand to his side.

"Hi. boss," he said to Killeano.

Killeano ignored him. He stood at the foot of the bed, looked at me.

"Hullo," I said, stubbing out my cigarette.

Flaggerty stood by the door. His face was set.

"Where's the Wonderly girl?" Killeano snapped.

"How do I know?" I said. "Think I carry her around in my pocket?"

"You'd better talk, Cain," he said. "We want that girl, and we're going to get her."

"You don't expect me to help, do you?" I said, lighting another cigarette. "I wouldn't tell you if I knew. We parted company last night after I'd given her enough dough to get out of town."

"She hasn't left town," Killeano said, stroking the bedrail with his small white hands. "There wasn't time before we closed the roads."

"Then she must still be in town," I said, shrugging. "Why don't you look for her?"

Bat threw a punch at me, but I saw it coming. I rolled off the bed on to the floor, grabbed him around the ankles. He came down on top of me. Flaggerty jumped us, and after a little squirming around and thumping, I felt a gun-barrel against my ear. I relaxed.

Bat's moronic face was close to mine.

"Take it easy," he said, "or I'd blow your lid off."

"I'm easy," I said.

They stood away. I got up.

"Look," I said, dusting myself down, "this won't get us anywhere." I sat on the bed, and reached for another cigarette. "Let me do a little talking. Maybe we'll find out where we stand."

Bat folded his fist, but Killeano stopped him.

"Let him talk," he said, sat down on the chair.

Bat and Flaggerty stood behind the bed ready to jump me if I looked like starting trouble.

"I'm making a lot of guesses," I said, looking at Killeano, out this is the way I see it. You're the top shot in town. The only guy who might have been dangerous to you was Herrick. You own the Casino, which is a swell place for getting rid of dud currency which you're printing. You didn't think I knew that, did you? It didn't take me long to figure that one out. You have the Bank and the police in your pocket, and no doubt you're paying the boys to keep their mouths shut. The dud money circulates in the town. But if the visitors take it out of town, you've made sure it's good enough to fox anyone until it's too late to trace it back to you. But what happens? Herrick suspects that you're passing dud notes, and he begins an investigation. He can't go to the police because they're playing with you. He has to work on his own. He gets some of your dud notes and he is ready to spring the surprise on the Governor of the State. But you get wise, and knock him off." I flicked my cigarette away and grinned at Killeano. "How am I going?"

His square-shaped face was expressionless. "Go on," he said.

"Herrick is an important citizen and is running for election! He's not the guy you can knock off regardless. You hear I'm coming to town. It doesn't take you long to figure I'm the boy who's to be blamed for the killing. You fix it, and you make a swell job of it, and I'm the fall guy. Okay. But you slip up on a couple of points. You forgot that Brodey was wise and had I evidence too, and you misjudged the girl who was to lead me into this mess. She ratted on you, and you know she can blow the lid right off your racket. Without her, you're sunk, even if you have made Brodey spill what he knows."

Killeano took a cigar from his vest pocket, bit off the end, spat. He lit the cigar carefully and blew out a cloud of smoke.

"Finished?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said.

He looked over at Flaggerty. "He knows too much," he said. "We'll have to alter our ideas. It wouldn't do to bring him before a jury now. They might cotton on."

"Killed while resisting arrest?" Flaggerty said, raising his eyebrows.

"That's it," Killeano said. "You'd better do it quick. This guy's a tricky customer."

"I'll say I am," I said, winking at Bat.

"With him out of the way, we can concentrate on finding the girl. She can't get away," Killeano went on.

"It wouldn't be a bad idea to get rid of both of them," Flaggerty said.

Killeano shook his head. "We've got to put on a show," he pointed out. "We'll fix her so she won't talk when it comes to the trial. Girls are easy." He looked across at Bat, who leered at him. "Could you handle her?"

"I could sort of try," Bat said, showing his teeth.

Killeano got up. "Get rid of him," he said to Flaggerty.

"So long, Fatso," I said. "Don't think you're safe. You're not. It'll catch up with you in the end."

He took no notice and went out, closing the door sharply behind him.

Bat looked at Flaggerty.

"Do it now?" he said hopefully.

"Not here," Flaggerty said. "We'll take him for a ride."

"Give it to me quick," I said to Bat, "and shoot straight."

"Sure, bub," he said, patting my arm. "It won't hurt."

7

Flaggery drove; Bat and I sat in the back. "How's it feel to take your last ride?" Bat asked, looking at me with simple curiosity. "All right," I said. "I got good nerves." "You have, at that, bub," he said admiringly. "But don't think you're going to skip out on this. You ain't."

"Doesn't look as if we'll find out who's the better man, does it, Bat?" I said after a while.

"I don't have to find out; I know," Bat said, grinning. "I can take you any time."

"Not you," I said. "I'd rather meet you in a gun fight than a paralysed old lady in mittens."

He clouted me in the face with his fist.

"Shaddap," he snarled. "I could take you blindfolded."

"You haven't the nerve to try, have you?" I said.

"He ain't going to," Flaggerty broke in. "We're not taking chances with a snake like you."

"See?" I said to Bat. "Even your pal thinks I'm better than you. Hear him?"

Bat breathed heavily.

"You ain't so good," he said, struggling with his fury. "I could take you. To hell with that lousy flatfoot. I could take you with a guy hanging on each of my arms."

"Pipe dreams," I said, and jerked my head out of the way as he slammed a punch at me. His fist hit the rear window of the car and smashed the glass.

Flaggerty cursed him.

"Cut it out, will you ?" he snarled. "You're going to plug this rat the way I tell you."

"The tough egg from Detroit taking orders from a small-time cop!" I jeered, digging Bat in the ribs.

Flaggerty slowed down and stopped.

We had arrived at a lonely stretch of beach. The lights of Paradise Palms were fading in the light of the dawn. It still looked a nice spot, but to me, it looked a long way away.

"Come on out," Flaggerty said. He sounded worried.

We got out.

Bat's face was purple in the yellow light.

"I'm going to show him," he snarled to Flaggerty. "I'm faster than he is, and I'll make the

punk admit it!"

"You'll do what I tell you!" Flaggerty bawled.

"Tell him to jump into a lake," I said to Bat. "He thinks you're a sissy."

Flaggerty's hand whipped inside his coat, but Bat grabbed his wrist.

"Make a move like that and I'l l blast you too," he raved, "I don't like coppers, see ? I'm going to prove it to this punk, and a yellow shamus like you ain't stopping me."

"You're crazy," Flaggerty spluttered. "Suppose he beats you? He'll kill us both."

Bat grinned. "No, he won't," he said. "I ain't as nutty as that." He took Flaggerty's gun and broke it open. Cartridges spilled on the sand. "See?" he went on, leering at Flaggerty. "He has an empty rod. I have a loaded one. He still gets it even if he beats me to the draw, but he won't."

"Get it?" He looked over at me. "Suit you, bub?"

"Sure," I said. "I'll go happy showing you a turn of speed."

Flaggerty backed away. He didn't like it, but there was nothing he could do about it.

"Well, get on with it," he said angrily.

Bat tossed me the gun. It was a blue Colt -45. It balanced sweetly in my hand.

"How's that, bub?" he asked, grinning at me.

"Swell," I said, and stuck the gun in the waist-band of my trousers.

"Okay," Bat said, squaring up. "You ready?"

"Don't rush it," I said. "Like to make a bet on it?"

"Haw! Haw!" Bat doubled up with laughter. "You'll kill me, bub. How you gonna pay after I creased you?"

"Cut this out," Flaggerty stormed. "Get on with it. Kill the punk."

"Yeah," Bat said suddenly scowling. "Well, bub, this is curtains for you." He crouched, shuffled his feet in the sand. I patched him, but even though he knew my gun was empty, he still hesitated.

"I'll give you time to go for your gun, Bat," I said, smiling at him. "A guy always has the drop on me before I kill him."

He snarled at me. "Only this time, I'll do the killing," he rasped.

Then he went for his gun.

If he hadn't loosened his holster, he'd have got me. But his gun stuck for just a fraction of a second, and it gave me time to yank out the Colt. I had it out by the time his hand was tugging at his gun butt.

"Beat you," I said, and flung the Colt in his face. I put everything I had into that throw. The Colt whizzed through the air, hit him a hell of a belt between the eyes. He went over backwards with a startled curse.

I jumped him, grabbed his gun, twisted away as Flaggerty threw himself at me. I kicked Flaggerty in the face, turned and hit Bat behind his ear with the Colt as he floundered to his knees.

Both of them stretched out flat in the sand, their arms flung wide and their faces turned to the morning sky.

That's the way I left them.

8

Strong sunlight was trying to force its way through the wooden shutter as I woke to find Hetty Duval standing over me. I sat up in the bed, blinked at her.

"I guess I must have slept," I said, running my fingers though my hair, exploring the lump on my head tenderly.

"I've brought you some coffee," she said. "Davis is waiting to see you. Shall I send him up?"

"Sure," I said, sniffing at the tray she had put on the bamboo table at my side. "What time is it?"

"Twelve," she said, and went out of the room.

I yawned, poured coffee, reached for a cigarette. I was lighting it when Davis lumbered in.

"Hi," I said, grinning at him.

"For crying out loud!" he said, staring at me. "I didn't expect to see you again."

"Nor did I," I said, waving him to the only chair in the little room. "Got any whisky on you?"

He produced a half-pint bottle from his hip pocket and handed it over.

"I was sure worried," he said, sitting down and mopping his face. "I'm getting cast-iron arteries through you."

I poured a couple of inches of the Scotch into my coffee and gave him back the bottle. He took a swig, sighed, shoved the bottle back into his pocket.

"Well, come on," he said impatiently. "Give. You ought to be dead."

I told him.

"I'll be damned for a Red Indian," he exclaimed when I was through.

"What happened to you?" I asked.

He puffed out his cheeks. "Brother, I thought it was all up with me. It

certainly did me no good when Flaggerty blew in."

I laughed. "I saw you," I said. "You looked like a fugitive from a nightmare."

"You telling me," Davis said, shaking his head. "What a moment Flaggerty and Sansotta got together, and Sansotta mentioned you. He said I'd brought in a guy who was a stranger to him. Flaggerty was on me like lightning. He wanted to know where I'd picked you up. I acted like I thought he was crazy, and told him I'd found you in a bar, and that you wanted a poker game. I swore that was all there was to it, and I had no idea who you were, and it was phoney enough to sound true. Flaggerty wanted to know what you looked like, and Sansotta supplied a detailed description. That tore it. 'It's Cain!' Flaggerty bawled, and you should see the way the crowd gaped. I acted surprised, but I needn't have bothered. They'd forgotten about me, and they made a dive for the stairs. I drifted. There seemed no sense in hanging around. I wrote you off as a funeral debt."

"Are you in the clear with them?"

He nodded. "Yeah, it looks all right. I've talked with Flaggerty this morning. He was half out of his mind with rage because you got away, and as for Bat ——" He broke off to whistle.

"Why did you see Flaggerty?"

"They've pinned Giles' murder on you," Davis said, taking out his comb and running it through his hair. "I've just written a piece about you. Like to see it?"

I shook my head. "Any news of Brodey?"

"Only that he's missing. They hint you're at the bottom of it."

I lolled back on the pillow. "We've got to get organized," I said thoughtfully. "These boys are good, but there's one way to lick them."

"Yeah? What's that?"

"Play one against the other," I said. "It'll need a little thought and planning, but it can be done. I won't be out of this jam until I've cleaned up the whole mob and that includes Killeano, Speratza, Flaggerty and Bat. If I can get them out of the way for good, I guess their organization will fold."

"I guess it will," Davis said, scratching his nose. "How are you going

to do it?"

"I'll find a way," I said.

"What do you want me to do?" he asked, after a pause.

"You still with me?"

He grinned. "Sure," he said. "Keep me under cover if you can, but if you can't, the hell with it. I'll stick whichever way it jumps. I like your style."

"Swell," I said, and meant it. "I hit the dud currency angle right on the nose," I went on. "I could tell by the way Killeano flinched that I'd guessed right. We've got to get hold of some of those notes, and we've got to find out where he makes them. A forgery plant isn't easy to hide.

Can you take care of that angle?"

He nodded. "I'll try."

"Then there's Brodey. I'm thinking about the little girl. We promised to find the old guy. Maybe you'd try to get a line on him."

"I reckon he's dead," Davis said.

"I guess so too. They wouldn't let him loose if he knows anything. Anyway, see what you can find out."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to see Tim."

"Where's he got to?"

"He's looking after the Wonderly girl."

Davis grinned. "Well, I'll be damned. I ought to have thought of that. You watch that girl. Flaggerty wants her bad."

"He won't get her," I said grimly. "Now beat it, and see what you can dig up."

When he had gone, I dressed and went downstairs.

Hetty Duval was scrubbing the kitchen floor. She looked over her broad shoulder at me, paused.

"I'm going to see Tim," I said. "Any message?"

"Tell him to come home when he can. I kind of miss him," she said, and blushed like a schoolgirl.

"I'll tell him," I said, and peered out of the window.

Tim's boat rode at anchor. No one seemed around.

"Like to go out and see if it's all clear?" I asked.

She went. After a few minutes, she returned. "It's all right "I she said.

I thanked her and walked down to the boat. I went hell for leather towards the islands. I suddenly wanted to see Miss Wonderly again. I was surprised how much I wanted to see her.

Three-quarters of the way across, I spotted a rowing boat. The guy who was pulling the oars acted like he was in a hurry. He waved to me, and then went on pulling.

I swung the boat off course and headed towards him.

It was Tim. His face was running with sweat and the look in his eyes turned me cold.

He tried to speak, but he was so breathless he couldn't: it. He raised his fists and shook them at the sky.

I hauled him on to the boat, grabbed him by the shoulder.

I knew what he was going to say.

He said it. "They've got her!"

Chapter Four
CYCLONE SHOT

1

THERE were a half a dozen Bobby-soxers sitting up on stools at | the drug-store counter when I came in. They didn't pay any; attention to me. They were too busy telling each other how much they loved Frank Sinatra. I didn't pay any attention to them. I had too much on my mind.

I shut myself in a telephone booth, called Killeano's private residence. They told me he was at the City Hall, and gave roe the number. I dropped in another nickel and put through a call to the City Hall.

A girl wanted to know who was calling.

"He'll tell you if he wants you to know," I said. "Put me through and step on it."

There was a delay, then Killeano's oily voice came over the wire.

"This is Cain," I said, speaking rapidly. "Turn that Wonderly girl loose right away, or I'll start something in this town that'll go down in its historical records. I'm not bluffing. I've taken all I'm going to take from you and your small-time outfit. Now I mean business."

"You do, eh?" Killeano snarled. "Well, so do I. Wonderly's confessed to the Herrick killing and she's signed a statement implicating you. How do you like that? We've got an open and shut case, and by God, I'm coming after you. I've given orders you're to be brought in dead or alive . . ."

"Okay, Killeano," I said. "From now on, it's gloves off. I'll get you for this. Make no mistake about it, and no one'll stop me."

I slammed down the receiver, joined Tim Duval, who was waiting outside in the Mercury convertible.

"She's in jail," I said, getting in beside him and slamming the door. "He says she's confessed."

He gave me an uneasy glance. "What are you going to do?" he asked, engaging gear.

"We'll go back to your place. We've got to make plans," I said, lighting a cigarette and trying to control my trembling hands. I was

cold with rage. "I'll get her out of there. I don't care how tough it is. I'll get her out."

"You'll never do it," Tim said. "They'll guess that's what you'll try to do, and they'll be ready for you."

"You don't think I'm going to leave that kid in their hands, do you?" I said, glaring at him. "I've got to get her out."

He nodded. "I can see that," he said, "but I don't figure how you're going to do it."

I snapped my fingers. "Know a good lawyer?"

"Jed would know."

"She's got to be represented. They can't keep a lawyer out. I'll call Jed when we get back. Step on it for God's sake."

I put a call through to Davis as soon as I reached Tim's place. Tim and Hetty hung around waiting.

Davis came on the line.

"They've got her," I told him. "They were tipped off by one of the rats who helped provision the boat. There's a reward for her and he sold her out. They worked on her, and she's signed a statement. I want a lawyer to represent her. Can you fix it."

"Sure," Davis said. "Coppinger will handle it. He hasn't any time for Killeano. I'll get after him. Where is she?"

"In the jail. And listen, money's no object. Tell this guy to get down there right away. Then when you've fixed him come over here fast. I want to talk to you."

"I'll be along," he said, and hung up.

I dropped the receiver on its hook and pushed back my chair.

Tim was eyeing me. "Can he do it?"

I nodded. "He's coming over as soon as he's fixed the mouthpiece," I said, and walked to the window.

I didn't know what the hell was the matter with me. I'd never felt like this before. I was cold; my muscles flicked the way a horse flicks its muscles to get rid of flies. My mouth was dry and I felt sick. I

wanted to go down to the jail and start shooting. I didn't care what happened to me so long as I could kill some of those rats who'd got that kid in their hands.

"Give me a drink," I said, without looking round.

Tim gave me a whisky.

I faced him. "You better keep out of this," I said abruptly. "I'm going to start a massacre in this town if I don't get her out. It's Killeano or me, and I'm stopping at nothing."

"Sit down," Tim said quietly.

"To hell with that!" I said. "I didn't realize what she meant to me until they grabbed her. I'm going to take the lid off now, and anyone who gets in my way will get hurt."

"Take it easy," Tim said, pushing me into a chair. "I know how you feel, but it won't get you anywhere to jump off the deep end. There's only one way to tackle this. You've got to use your head. If you get wild and jump in with both feet, you'll be playing into Killeano's hands."

I drew a deep breath, tried to grin. "You're right, Tim," I said. "I'm mad right now, but as you say, there's no sense Bi rushing into trouble. Somehow we've got to get her out and quick. But it needs planning. I guess I'll go look that jail over."

"You'd better wait for Jed," Tim advised. "He knows the jail. You can't afford to be picked up."

"Right again," I said. "We'll wait for Jed."

We had to wait a couple of hours. They were the longest hours I've ever lived through, and I wouldn't like to live through them again.

Davis came around three o'clock. The afternoon sun sizzingly hot and he was sweating. He stood in the doorway and looked at us.

"I fixed Coppinger," he said. "He's gone down to see her, and he'll be over here when he's through."

"Sit down," I said, waving to a chair. "Is it true she's signed statement?

He nodded. "They've given it to the press. It'll be in the evening papers." He took out his comb and fiddled with it.

"They've had six hours to work on her before we knew they'd got her," he went on. "That's plenty of time to make a girl talk …"

Tim nudged him. "Shut up," he said.

"That's all right," I said, but I knew my face had gone white. "I'm not kidding myself what those heels have done to her. Well, they'll pay for it." I lit a cigarette while the other two exchanged glances. "Any ideas how we can get her out?" I asked suddenly, looking at Davis.

He gaped at me. "Get her out?" he repeated. "It can't be done. There just isn't any way of getting her out. That jail's like a fort, and Flaggerty has about twenty guards around the outside. I went down there with Coppinger and they wouldn't let me in. They're reckoning you'll try to get her out. They've got a couple of searchlights rigged on the roof, and every guard has a Thompson. They've even got dogs patrolling. Not a chance."

I suddenly felt better. I grinned at him.

"I'm getting her out of that jail," I said.

"I'd like to know how you're going to do it," Davis said, his eyes opening.

"Is this place on the main road?" He nodded. "It stands back a quarter of a mile from State Highway Four. You can see it from the road as you leave town."

"I'll go out and look it over," I said. "When do you reckon Coppinger will be along?"

"About an hour," Davis said. "I'll drive you over to the jail and pick up Coppinger on his way out. You can travel the way you travelled last night."

"Okay," I said, and took out Bat's .38 Police Special. It was a good gun, but I wished I had my Luger. I checked it over, then shoved it down the waist-band of my trousers.

Still want to be mixed up in this?" I asked Davis.

He looked surprised. "Why, sure," he said.

"I'm asking you because from now on there'll be no backing out. It'll be a fight to the finish."

He scratched his head, then shrugged. "I'll stick."

I looked across at Tim.

"And you?"

He nodded.

"That's fine," I said, and meant it.

I went to the door. Davis followed me.

2

Coppinger was a little guy, about forty years old, with a leathery face and a black moustache. His eyes were blue, sharp and cold. He looked sleepy, but there was something about him that told me he knew more than most guys awake.

"She's in a spot," he said, when he finally got seated. I don't know what they've done to her, but they've done plenty." He shook his head, and took out a bag of Bull Durham smoking tobacco and a packet of brown papers. He rolled himself a cigarette. "She acts like she's already dead."

The hair on the back of my neck bristled. "What did she say?"

He lit the limp cigarette, let it dangle out of the side of his mouth.

"She said she killed Herrick," he told me in a flat voice. "That's all she did say. Although I was alone with her, although I kept telling her I was working for you, she just wouldn't bite. 'I killed him,' she kept saying. 'Leave me alone. I killed him and there's nothing you can do about it.' " He shook his head again. "She's a goner, Cain. There's nothing I can do for her. We can plead not guilty, but we can't make a fight of it."

"Okay," I said, "stick around. See her as much as you can, and keep working on her. I wanted to be sure we couldn't beat the rap. Now, I know what to do."

He looked at me thoughtfully.

"I've heard about you," he said. "You've got a reputation. It won't get that girl anywhere if you try violence. They're going to bring her to trial. If she looks like sliding through their fingers, she'll meet with an accident. I know Killeano and Flaggerty. Those boys won't stop at anything, and I mean anything. The election's too close. They've got to clean up Herrick's murder before then. So be careful how you step."

I nodded. "I'll be careful."

"Thinking of getting her out?" he asked, after a pause.

I looked at Jed Davis, who was sitting across the room.

He nodded.

"That's the idea," I said. "I went out there this afternoon and had a look. It'll be tough."

"You won't get her out alive," Coppinger said, "if you get her out at all."

"But that s our only chance."

"I know." He stroked his nose, stared down at his feet. "Even if you got inside help, it'd be impossible."

I eyed him. "What inside help?"

He lifted his narrow shoulders. "There's a guard I know …" he began, then shrugged. "What's the good? It couldn't be done."

I slammed my fist on the table. "It's got to be done!" I exploded. "What about the guard?"

"A fellow named Tom Mitchell. Flaggerty's fooling around with his wife. Mitchell knows, but he can't do anything. He'd like to get even if he could. You might talk to him."

"I have to be careful whom I talk to," I said.

Coppinger nodded. "Mitchell's safe. He's aching to put one over Flaggerty. But I don't think he could be much use except to give you the lay-out of the jail. I wouldn't let him know too much."

I turned to Davis.

"See this guy, and bring him down to the wharf when it's dark. I'll talk to him."

Davis nodded, got up and went out.

I slid two hundred bills over to Coppinger. "There's more to come," I said. "Keep with that kid."

He pushed them back. "I'm doing this for fun," he said. "I've been hoping someone smart and tough enough would blow into town and crack Killeano. I'm not taking payment for having a front row seat. Something tells me you'll crack him."

"I think I will," I said, and shook hands.

After he had gone, I sat down and stared out of the window and watched the Conch fishermen preparing their boats for the night's

fishing. I thought about Miss Wonderly, and the more I nought about her, the worse I felt. I remembered the way she looked sitting on the raft at Dayden Beach. I remembered the way she looked lying in the sand when I was grilling the spareribs. It seemed a long time ago. Then I remembered Bat's moronic face and Killeano saying, "Do you think you could handle her?" And Bat saying, "I guess I could sort of try." I felt bad, all right.

The next three hours dragged away, and by the time it was dark I was lower than a snake's belly.

Tim looked in about eight o'clock, gave me an evening paper. The Herrick killing was smeared over the front page. There was a picture of Miss Wonderly. She looked cute. They called her the Blonde Killer.

They had the confession in full, and I read it. It was cock-eyed enough to sound true. Miss Wonderly said she and I had returned to Palm Beach Hotel, and had had a lot of drinks. I was sore because Herrick wanted me to leave town. I said I'd show him he couldn't talk that way to me, and Miss Wonderly admitted she goaded me to call him, thinking I was bluffing. I called Herrick and asked him over. He came. I was drunk by then. We were supposed to have quarrelled and Herrick got angry. We fought, and Miss Wonderly hit Herrick on the head with my gun. Herrick fell down and bust his head open on the fire curb. We passed out, and woke the next morning to find Herrick dead.

That was the story, and it was signed. The signature was shaky and indistinct. I felt like hell looking at it.

Tim came back after a while to say Davis was waiting for me at the end of the wharf. He had Mitchell with him.

I went down.

It was dark, and the stars reflected on the still water of the harbour. There was no one around. At the end of the wharf I found Davis with a big, beefy man who had copper written all over him.

"This is Mitchell," Davis said.

I stepped up to the man, peered at him. I couldn't see much of him in the dim light, but he didn't look as if he would give me any trouble. He peered right back at me.

I didn't beat about the bush. "I'm Cain," I said. "How do you like that?"

He gulped, looked at Davis, then back at me.

"How am I supposed to like it?" he asked, in a thick voice.

"You love it," I said.

He raised his hands shoulder high. "Okay," he said.

"Relax," I told him. "You don't have to be scared of me. But if you start something, you won't have time to be scared. Get it?"

He said he understood. I could see he was looking reproachfully at Davis.

"You don't have to feel sore," Davis said irritably. "We're going to do you a bit of good."

"How'd you like to get even with Flaggerty and pick up five Cs as well?" I asked.

Mitchell peered at me. "Doing what?" he asked, interest in his voice.

"Answering a few questions."

"Sure would."

"Where do you live?"

He told me.

I looked at Davis. "Is it far?"

"About five minutes."

"We'll go there, and mind, Mitchell, don't start anything funny."

"I won't."

We piled into Davis's car, drove over to Mitchell's place. He took us into the front room. It was plainly but comfortably furnished.

"You alone?" I asked.

"Yeah," he said, flinching.

"You mean your wife's giving Flaggerty a work out?" I said.

He clenched his fists; his face went yellow.

"Skip it," I said. "We know what's going on; so do you. The idea is to

even things up, isn't it? Well, that's why I'm here."

He turned away, brought out a bottle of Scotch. He set up three glasses. We all sat down round the table.

Mitchell was about forty-five. His big, simple face was fleshy and carried a lot of freckles. He wasn't a bad-looking guy, but he had that look of gloom husbands get when their wives are twotiming.

"What's your job in the jail?" I asked, as soon as we'd settled.

"I look after floor D."

"On what floor is Miss Wonderly?"

He blinked, looked at Davis who didn't meet his eye, looked back at me.

"Didn't you say something about five Cs?" he asked cautiously.

"I did," I said, and shot him a hundred. "That's to sweeten you. You'll get the rest when you've told me what I wart to know."

He fingered the hundred, nodded.

"She's on A floor."

"Where's that?"

"Top floor."

"Get paper and pencil and show me the lay-out of the jail."

He got paper and pencil and began to draw. We sat around drinking and smoking until he'd finished.

"This is it," he said. "Here's where you go in. There're two sets of gates. Each has a different key and guard. You book your prisoner in here. Women are booked in on the left. You take your prisoner along ——"

"Wait," I said. "I'm only interested in the women's side. Concentrate on the women."

He nodded. "Okay," he said. "Well, the women go in through this door and are booked. They're taken along this passage——"

"What's that square there you've drawn?"

"That's the guards' office. That next to it is the police surgeon's office. That's the mortuary behind it and the P.M. room. We keep them all together because Flaggerty likes to make the jail his headquarters."

"Okay. Where's A floor?"

"You reach it by this elevator. The women are not allowed] to use the stairs because the stairs give off to the other floors."

"How many women prisoners have you got in there?"

"Four—no, three. One of 'em died this morning."

"Where's Miss Wonderly's cell?"

He showed me the cell on the map he'd drawn. I made him mark it with a cross.

"How many guards have you up there?"

"There are three women guards. One goes around the cells every hour."

"How about the men guards?"

"They don't go to A floor, but they're around on the other floors every hour. Two to each floor."

"How many in the building?"

"Ten guards on duty, ten off. Since the girl came, Flaggerty has brought down another twenty from Station Headquarters to guard the outside of the jail. It has plenty of protection right now."

I studied the map for several minutes, then sat back and stared at Mitchell.

"If you wanted to get someone out of that jail," I said, "how would you set about it?"

He shook his head. "I wouldn't," he said. "It ain't possible."

I handed him the four Cs, and after he'd fingered them and put them away in his pocket, I took out a thousand-dollar bill.

"Ever seen one of these?" I asked him.

He gaped at it, his eyes round.

"'I'd give this to the guy who could tell me how to get that girl out," I said.

He hesitated, then shrugged. "I wish I could, but it just ain't possible." He edged his chair forward. "I'll tell you why. You've got to get in. That's the first step. They've got dogs, searchlights and guards. Maybe you've seen the place ? There aint a scrap of cover around the jail for five hundred yards . . . just sand. The searchlights light up the whole of the expanse of

sand, and there ain't a chance of you getting to the gate without being seen."

"Okay," I said. "Let's suppose we do get up to the gate. What next?"

"But you won't get to the gate," he said impatiently.

"Just suppose we do. Go on from there."

He shrugged. "The guard at the gate checks your credentials. No one except the doctor or a police official is allowed near the place now they've got her. They know you're smart and they're taking no chances. Coppinger had a hell of a time getting in."

"Well, okay. Let's imagine the doctor goes there. He gets in. Then what happens?"

"The guard hands him over to another guard who unlocks the second door, and the doc is escorted to his office. He can't go anywhere else in the prison, unless someone's ill. When that dame died this morning, he was escorted to her cell by a guard and the Head Wardress."

"I thought you said the male guards didn't go to the Women's quarters?" I said sharply.

"They don't unless a male visitor has business in the quarters. Coppinger, for instance, was escorted by two guards."

I drummed on the table. "So it can't be done?" I said.

He sighed regretfully. "I'd tell you if it could be," he said. "I could use that grand, but I know it's hopeless. Believe me, no one can get into that jail and no one can get out. They could try, but they'd be dead meat before they got properly started. I tell you: Flaggerty is expecting you to try. He's got everything sewn up tight, and when that rat sews up anything tight, it stays tight."

I got up. "Okay, Mitchell," I said. "Keep your trap shut about this. I'll think it over. You might still be able to earn that grand. When do you go on duty?"

"Tomorrow morning at seven."

"What's your first job?"

"Inspect the cells, then I've got the job of cleaning up after the P.M."

"What P.M.?"

"They're trying to find out why this dame died. The P.M. is for nine-thirty tomorrow morning."

"Right," I said. "I'll be seeing you."

Out in the hot darkness, Davis said, gloomily, "What the hell are we going to do now?"

"Get that girl out," I said grimly.

"Talk sense. You heard what the man said."

"Sure I heard," I said. "I tell you what I'll do. I'll bet you ten bucks I have her out by tomorrow night."

He stared at me in disgust. "Aw, you're nuts," he said, getting into the car, "but I'll take your money."

"I'm not nuts," I said, climbing in beside him. "I have an idea."

3

A half an hour later I was in the car again with Davis, driving, and Tim Duval in the back. "This is it," Tim said, peering out of the window. Davis swung to the kerb and stopped before a sober-looking building. Above the shop-front was a sign: "Maxison's Funeral Parlour."

"I hope you know what you're doing," Davis said.

"Quit beefing," Tim said, before I could speak. "I'm having the time of my life. Why should you care what he does so long as he does something and takes you with him?"

"Just because you're an irresponsible citizen without a job, to lose, don't think there aren't people who have to consider their futures," Davis snorted. "I'm one of them. This guy's got the bit in his teeth, and I want to know into what kind of hell he's dragging me."

"You'll know," I said. "I have one chance to get into that jail, and I'm taking it. That's why

we've come here."

"You'll come here after you've been to the jail," Davis pointed out. "Maxison will give you a swell funeral."

"Quiet!" I said, then turned to look at Tim. "Maxison live over the premises?"

"Yep," Tim said. "He's lived there for years."

"Come on," Davis pleaded. "Don't be mysterious. Tell me. I want to know."

"This is a long chance," I said, fishing out a packet of cigarettes and lighting one. I offered them round. The others lit up. "You heard what Mitchell said. No one can get near the jail unless he's an official. He also told us a woman prisoner died this morning, and she's to be posted tomorrow morning. Then she'll be buried. Tim tells me Maxison is the only mortician in town. He does all the official burials, and that includes prison burials. I'm going to be his assistant. In that way I hope to get into the jail."

Davis's mouth fell open.

"For crying out loud!" he gasped. "Now that's what I call a damn smart idea. How did you think of it?"

"I thought of it," I said.

He took out his comb, lifted his hat, combed his hair.

"Wait a minute," he said. "What makes you think Maxison will play, and suppose they recognize you at the jail?"

"Maxison will play," I said quietly. "Tim tells me he has a daughter. I don't want to do this, but I have to. We're going to hold his daughter as hostage. If he tries to double-cross me, we'll threaten to knock the girl off."

Davis's small eyes popped.

"We're gangsters now, eh?" he said. "Jeeze! I don't think I like this much."

"You can duck out whenever you like," I said, shrugging. "Hetty will look after the girl. It's just a threat. I must have some hold on him."

"Don't be a sissy," Tim said to Davis. 'You've always looked like a gangster. It's time you acted like one."

Davis grunted. "Well, okay," he said. "Kidnapping carries the death sentence now. Who cares?"

I opened the car, got out.

"Hey," he went on, leaning out of the car. "Suppose they recognize you in the jail? What happens then?"

"Let's wait and see," I said. "You stay with the heep. Tim and I'll handle this. If a copper shows, sound your horn and beat it. We don't want them to get a line on you just yet."

He wrinkled his fat nose. "We don't want them ever to get a line on me," he pointed out. "Well, go ahead, I'll sit here and pray. I'm good at that."

Tim and I went to the side door near the display window. I rang the bell. We waited.

There was a short delay, then we heard someone coming along the passage. The door opened and a thin, narrow-shouldered girl stood in the doorway.

I tipped my hat.

"I wanted to see Mr. Maxison," I said.

She stared at me, then at Tim. "It's very late," she said. "Couldn't you see him tomorrow?"

"Well, no," I said. "It's something I would like him to handle and it's urgent."

She hesitated, then nodded.

"If you'll wait," she said, and turned away. She got half-way down the passage, then came back. "What is the name, I please?"

"He wouldn't know my name," I said.

"Oh," she said, looking at me again, and went away.

"That's Laura Maxison," Tim said. "Maxison thinks a lot of her. Odd little thing, ain't she?"

I shrugged. "I guess if you had a daughter you'd think a lot of her whichever way she looked."

"I guess you're right," he said.

The door opened again, and a lean, elderly man with a stoop peered at us.

"Good evening," he said. "Was there something?"

"Yeah," I said, eyeing him over. He was bald, with a great dome of a forehead, and his eyes were small and close set. He looked what he was, and foxy as well. "Can we come in?"

"I suppose so," he said doubtfully, standing to one side. "It's very late for business."

"Better late than never," Tim said for something to say.

We entered the passage and followed Maxison into the green-carpeted reception-room. The air in there smelt musty. There was also an odour of floor polish and embalming fluid, aromatic, sweet and sickening.

Maxison turned on a few more lights, and took up his stand by a large glass showcase full of miniature coffins.

"Now, gentlemen," he said, pulling nervously at his faded purple and white tie. "What can I do for you?"

"I'm Chester Cain," I said.

He took an abrupt step back, his hand jumped to his mouth. Fear made him look old and stupid. His thin, almost skull-like face turned the colour of ripe cheese.

"You don't have to worry," I said, watching him closely. "I'm here on profitable business . . . profitable business to you."

His teeth began to chatter. "Please," he stuttered, "you mustn't stay here. I can't do business with you . . ."

I jerked a straight-back chair towards him. "Sit down," I said.

He seemed glad to.

"You and I are doing business whether you like it or not," I told him. "I'm going to ask you some questions, and if you know what's good for you, you'll answer them. You're burying a woman prisoner at the jail tomorrow?"

He cracked his finger-joints, his limbs trembled, but he obstinately shook his head. "I can't talk to you," he mumbled. "I hold an official position at the jail, and it'd be a breach of faith."

"You'll talk," I said, standing over him, "or I'll take you for a ride." Jerking out the .38, I rammed it into his chest. For a moment I thought he was going to faint, but he managed to control himself.

"Don't . . ." he began, in a husky whisper.

"You talking?"

He nodded wildly.

I put the .38 away.

"Okay. We'll try again. This time get your answers out quick."

He nodded again. His breathing had a rattle in it that added to the spooky atmosphere of the room.

"You're burying a woman prisoner at the jail tomorrow morning," I repeated. "Right?"

"Yes," he said.

"What time?"

"Ten o'clock."

"What time will you arrive at the prison?"

"Nine-fifty."

"What's the procedure ?"

He blinked, hesitated, then blurted out, "I and my assistant will prepare the body after the post-mortem, put it in the coffin and bring it back here for the relatives to claim."

"You load the body into the coffin in the P.M. room or the woman's cell?"

"In the P.M. room."

I grimaced. That was what I had expected, but not what I had hoped to hear. It meant I should have to get Miss Wonderly from her cell down to the P.M. room. That wasn't going to be easy.

"The coffin ready?"

He nodded.

"Show me."

As he got to his feet, a bell tinkled faintly somewhere in the house. The sound took me like a flash to the door.

"Watch him," I said to Tim, and shoved the .38 into his hand. I darted out into the passage.

As I moved towards a door at the far end of the passage, I heard a telephone dial whirring. I ran on tip-toe to the door, jerked it open and went in.

The thin, narrow-shouldered Laura was feverishly dialling the telephone. She looked up with a gasp as I entered. I cross the room, gently took the receiver out of her hand, hung up.

"I'd forgotten about you," I said, smiling at her. "Call the police?"

She jumped back against the wall, her pale, plain little face terrified. She clasped her hands to her flat chest and shaped mouth for a

scream.

"Don't do that," I said, "I want to talk to you."

Her mouth trembled, hesitated, closed. She stayed where she was and stared at me; fear lurked in her eyes.

"You know who I am, don't you?" I asked.

Her throat tightened, but she managed to nod.

"I wouldn't hurt you, and I want you to help me. Don't be scared of me. I'm in trouble and I want help."

She looked puzzled, blinked her eyes, but she didn't say anything.

"Look at me," I said. "I don't look dangerous, do I?"

She looked. I could see the fear leaving her eyes, and she straightened up.

"No," she said, in a voice that wouldn't have scared a mouse.

"I'm not," I assured her. "You've read about me in the newspapers, haven't you?"

She nodded.

"You know they've arrested Miss Wonderly, and they've charged her with murder, don't you?"

She nodded again. Interest had replaced fear.

I took out the newspaper photograph of Miss Wonderly and showed it to her.

"Do you think she looks like a killer?" I asked.

She studied the photograph. There was a wistful look on her face when she handed it back.

"No," she said.

"She didn't kill Herrick, nor did I. It was a political killing, and they've pinned it on me because I happened to come to this town with a bad reputation."

She looked down at her hands. There was a faint flush on her face.

I stared moodily at her.

"Have you ever been in love, Laura?" I asked abruptly.

She flinched.

"You have?" I went on, when she didn't speak. "It didn't work out?"

"My father ..." She stopped.

"All right," I said. "It's not my business. But if you have been in love, you'll know how I feel.

I'm in love with that girl. I'm crazy about her, and I'm going to get her out of that jail if it costs me my life. I want you to help me."

She began to breathe quickly. "But how can I help?" she said, without looking at me.

"By not making a fuss. I'll tell you what I have to do. I don't want to do it, but I have to do it. My girl's life is at stake, and I'll do anything to get her out of the mess she's in. I'm going to take you away from here, and keep you until she's free. That's the only way I can make your father work with me. I give you my word you won't come to any harm, and you'll be returned here in a day or so."

She started up.

"Oh no," she said. "Please don't take me away."

I walked over to her and lifted her chin.

"Still scared of me?" I asked.

She looked at me.

"No."

"Swell," I said. "Come on, I want to talk to your father. I thought you'd help me."

We returned to the reception-room. Maxison was sitting glaring at Tim, who was trying to look like a Chicago gangster. He didn't do it very well.

"Your daughter's got a lot of guts," I said to Maxison. "Now show me that coffin."

He took us into a back room. It was large with bare walls. Coffins

stood on the uncarpeted floor.

Maxison pointed to an imitation ebony coffin with ornate silver handles.

"That's it," he said.

I went over, lifted the lid. It was well finished inside, complete with a lead shell and a thick mattress.

"That's an expensive box for a jail-bird," I said, looking at Maxison. "Who's paying for it?"

"Her husband," he said, cracking his finger-joints and looking at Laura in a puzzled way out of the corners of his eyes.

I took out the mattress, fiddled around trying to get out the lead shell. I spotted the screws, and went over to the tool rack and brought back a long screw-driver. I took out the lead shell. Without the mattress and the lead shell there was an additional twelve inches from the bottom of the coffin to the top.

I did a little measuring and stood back, frowning.

"Could you put a false bottom to this?" I asked Maxison.

He gaped at me. "Yes, but what——"

"Skip it," I said, and turned to Laura, who was watching me with large eyes. "Will you do something for me, kitten?" I said. I patted the coffin. "Get in here."

"Oh no," she said, with a shudder. "I—I couldn't do that."

"Please," I said.

Maxison started forward but Tim raised the gun, bringing] the old man to an abrupt stop.

"Stay where you are, Laura," Maxison grated.

She hesitated, looked at me and then stepped to the coffin. I lifted her up and lowered her in. She sat in the thing, her eyes dark, her mouth working. She looked like something out of the *Grand Guignol.*

"Lie down," I said.

Shuddering, she lay down. I took more measurements.

"Fine," I said, and pulled her up. "Out you come." When she was out, I turned to Maxison. "I wanted to see if this coffin was big enough to hold two bodies. It is. You and I are putting your dead woman in and Miss Wonderly goes in under her. You're to fit a false bottom to this box. That's how I plan to get Miss Wonderly out of jail."

4

I arrived at Maxison's place at nine o'clock the next morning. There was a sedate, oldfashioned motor hearse parked outside.

I gave it a quick glance, then pushed open the glass door of the showroom and walked in.

Maxison was waiting for me. He was dolled up in a long black coat with silk lapels and a high hat. His face looked ghastly in the hard sunlight, his mouth twitched.

"Is she all right?" he asked anxiously, as soon as he saw me.

"Sure," I said. "So long as you play ball with me, you don't have to worry about Laura. She isn't worrying, and she has a woman to look after her." I tapped him on his bony chest. "But one false move from you, Maxison, she won't be all right."

He flinched, looked away. I felt sorry for the old geyser, but there was nothing else I could have done. I knew I couldn't trust him, and I had to have a hold on him.

"Did you get rid of your assistant like I said?" I asked.

Maxison nodded. "He's been wanting to do a trip with his wife to Miami for a long time. I told him he could go."

"Okay," I said. "We're almost set?"

"Yes."

"Let's go into the back room," I said, and pushed past him.

The coffin was standing on trestles. I raised the lid, examined the false bottom and the airholes. Maxison had made a swell job. I told him so.

"We'd better have a couple more air-holes by the handles," I said. "It's going to be a tight fit, and I don't want her to have a bad journey. Will you fix that?"

While he was doing this I unpacked a grip I'd brought with me. Neither Davis, Tim, nor I had ceased to work on our plans during the night, and none of us had had any sleep, but I was now satisfied that

everything had been covered satisfactorily. We had seen Mitchell again, and I had bought his co-operation for a grand. He was to play an important part in the jail break. He knew it would cost him his job, but he didn't care. He was sick of Paradise Palms and Flaggerty, and was ready to pull out as soon as he'd done his job for me.

I changed into a prison-guard's uniform that Mitchell had obtained for me. It wasn't a bad fit; I studied myself for a moment in the long mirror on the wall.

Maxison watched me furtively, but he didn't say anything. I took out a long black coat like his and put it on. It was high-necked and successfully hid the guard's uniform. Then I slipped into my mouth two little rubber pads Tim had borrowed from an actor friend. The effect of the pads was remarkable. They completely changed my appearance, making me look plump and rabbit-toothed. A pair of horn-rimmed glasses completed a simple, but excellent disguise.

"How do you like your new assistant?" I asked, turning so Maxison could see me.

He gaped. "I wouldn't have known you," he said, and he sounded as if he meant it.

"I hope not," I returned. "Flaggerty knows me a little too well. This has got to fool him."

Maxison had refitted the false bottom to the coffin and was now ready to go.

"Right," I said, going over to him. "We're not going to fail. Things may get sticky, but whatever happens, you must keep your head. I'm George Mason, your new assistant. Your other assistant is on vacation. I come from Arizona, and I'm the son of an old friend of yours. I don't suppose they'll check up, but if they do, you must give them the answers without batting an eyelid. If I'm caught, it's going to be just too bad for Laura. Understand?"

He licked his lips, looked sick, said he did.

"Okay," I said, putting on a stove-pipe hat like his. "Let's go"

I drove the hearse. Although it looked old-fashioned, there was nothing wrong with its eightcylinder engine. It had a lot of speed, and I let it out on the coast road. A mile or so from the jail I eased up on the accelerator; we drove along at a sedate twenty miles an hour.

As the roof of the jail appeared above the sand-dunes, I saw two policemen standing in the road. They had Thompsons slung over their shoulders; they looked bored, and waved to us to stop.

"You do the talking," I said to Maxison, out of the corner of my mouth. "This is only a

rehearsal for the real thing. These boys won't worry us."

The two cops stood each side of the hearse, peered at us.

"Where are you going?" one of them asked Maxison.

"The jail," he said curtly, and produced a burial certificate and the court order for the release of the body.

The two cops read the papers and handed them back. I could see by the blank looks on their faces they couldn't make head nor tail of the legal jargon, but they weren't suspicious.

"Okay, seems in order," one of them said importantly. He took a yellow sticker from his pocket and pasted it on the fender of the hearse. "That'll get you to the gates. No speeding, and stop if you're signalled."

"And that means stop," the other cop said, grinning. "The boys up there are sure itching to use their rods."

Maxison thanked them, and I released the clutch. We continued up the road.

"They're certainly taking no chances," I said.

Maxison gave me a surly look, grunted. "What did you expect?" he said.

On the other side of the sand-hills, I spotted four cops sitting round a machine-gun on a threelegged stand, covering the road. One of the cops was equipped with a portable radio, and he was tuning-in as I crawled by. They eyed the yellow sticker and then waved us on. It began to dawn on me that Mitchell had been right about it being impossible to get into the jail in the ordinary way.

Four hundred yards from the side- road that led through the sand-dunes to the jail was a barricade made out of a big tree-trunk on wheels.

I stopped.

Three cops in their shirt sleeves appeared from behind the barricade, and swarmed round us.

One of them, a big, red-faced guy with sandy hair, nodded to Maxison.

"Hey, Max," he said, grinning. "Howja like the war conditions? Ain't it hell? That punk Flaggerty sure has the breeze up. We've been camped out here all night, and now we're being skinned by the sun. You going to the jail?"

"Yes," Maxison said.

The cop looked me over.

"Ain't seen him before," he said to Maxison. "Who's he?"

"George Mason," Maxison said calmly enough. "My new assistant. O'Neil's on vacation."

"He would be, the lazy rat," the cop said, spitting in the sand. "He's always on vacation." He looked at me. "Glad to know you, Mason. I'm Clancy. Howja like the new job?"

"Pretty good," I said, shaking his sweaty paw. "The beauty of this job is our customers can't answer back."

He bellowed with laughter.

"Say! That's a funny one," he exploded, slapping his thigh. "Did you hear what the guy said, fellas?" he went on to the other two cops who stood around, grinning.

"We heard," they said.

"Pretty funny," Clancy declared. "I didn't think guys in your trade had a sense of humour."

"That's all we have got," I said. "What goes on? I've never seen a jail guarded as tight as this one."

Clancy wiped sweat from his fat face with his forearm. "Aw, the hell with it," he said in disgust. "We got that Wonderly dame locked up, and our Chief thinks Cain's going to get her out. He's nuts, but there's no one with enough guts to tell him. I bet Cain's out of the State by now. Why the hell should he bother with a dame he picked up for the night?"

"She's a nice looker," one of the other cops said. "I'd trade her for my wife."

"I'd trade her for mine too," Clancy said, "but I wouldn't risk my neck for her."

"This guy Cain must be a tough egg if Flaggerty thinks all you boys are necessary to keep

him out," I said, grinning.

"I tell you Flaggerty's nuts," Clancy snorted. "Mind you, if that dame did escape, he'd lose his job. I heard Ed. Killeano tell him."

"Pretty soft for him," I returned. "I bet he's sitting some place cool, while you boys sweat it out in the sun."

"You bet he is, the monkey-faced punk," Clancy said, scowling. "He's got a swell office with air-conditioning on the top floor so he can keep an eye on hard-working stooges like me." He kicked sand, shaking his head. "I don't know what's come over this jail. A dame died yesterday, and damn me if another ain't gone cuckoo this morning. Dived off the deep end as I came on duty. Brother, she gave me a turn. You'll hear her screaming and laughing when you get inside. It gives me the heebies to listen to her."

"They'll take her away, won't they?" I said curiously.

"Yeah, in a day or so, but she's in the cell next to the Wonderly dame, and Flaggerty reckons it'll soften the poor little judy to have someone like that peering through the bars at her."

I gripped the wheel tightly, and I felt my face turn white, but Clancy didn't notice.

"They didn't oughta keep a dame like that in the jail," he went on. "She's making the other prisoners restless. She's dangerous too. She was in for sticking a knife into her old man. I'm keeping clear of A floor."

"Let us through, Clancy," Maxison said, glancing at me. "We have a job to do at ten."

"Sure," he said. "These boys are okay," he said to the other cops. "Let 'em through."

As I drove the hearse slowly past the barricade, Clancy bawled after

me, "If you see that punk Cain, tell him we're expecting him, and not to disappoint us."

"I'll tell him to pick his box first," I called back, "and pick it from us."

They laughed like a bunch of hyenas.

"How are you making out?" I asked Maxison.

He was wiping his face with a handkerchief, and he looked hot and uncomfortable.

"I'm all right," he said shortly.

"Did you hear what that cop said?" I asked, through tight lips. "About that crazy dame being next to my girl? Did you hear it? Did you think what it means?"

"Yes," he said sullenly.

"Oh no, you didn't," I snarled at him. "But put Laura in my girl's shoes and then ask yourself how you'd like it."

I saw his face stiffen; he didn't say anything.

The drab stone building of the jail reared above us. Sunlight baked the granite walls. It was a lost, forlorn place, and it chilled me to look at it.

I stopped before the two large oak and iron gates. On the right of the gates was a small lodge. Two cops came out carrying automatic rifles.

"Hello, Maxison," one of them said. "We've been expecting you."

"Can we go in, Franklin?" Maxison said. "These new regulations are confusing me."

"It's all hooey," Franklin said, scowling. "Sure, you can go in I'll open the gate for you."

As he moved to the gates he caught sight of me. He turned back.

"Who's this guy?" he demanded. He had a flat squashed face, and eyes like a Chinaman.

Maxison explained I was his new assistant, and where O'Neil, the other assistant, had got to.

Franklin scratched his head. "Well, I dunno," he said. "I got

instructions to let in only those people I know by sight. I've never seen this guy before. I guess I'd better call the sergeant."

"Skip it," one of the other cops said. "The sergeant's at breakfast. You don't want to make him mad for the rest of the day."

"Will you hurry?" Maxison asked, trying to stop his teeth from chattering. "I have a job to do. I'm late already."

Franklin stared at me with a worried frown. I leaned out of the car window, jerked my head at him. He came closer.

"Can't you rustle up a crap game?" I asked, keeping my

voice low. "The old man can do the work. I got money to lose."

He grinned suddenly, the frown went away. "To hell with that for an idea," he said. "Here, get out of the buggy."

I pulled the .38 from my waist-band as I pretended to fumble at the door. I shoved the gun to Maxison, who sat on it, his face turning a faint green.

I dropped on to the hot sandy road.

"Better make sure you're not heeled," Franklin said, but he was grinning all the time. "Then you can go in."

He ran his hands over my body. If he had told me to undo my overcoat I'd have been sunk, because he'd have seen the guard's uniform. But he didn't.

"Okay, hop in, and beat it," he said, stepping back.

I got into the hearse and slammed the door. My left hand reached under Maxison and retrieved the .38. I slipped it into my pocket. I felt a lot better with that gun within reach.

We drove through the gate into a courtyard. I saw the dogs then. They were massive brutes that strained at their chains when they saw us, snarling and showing their teeth. None of them barked. Their silent snarling made them look like wolves. I was glad to get past them.

We stopped outside a steel grill. Four or five guards paced up and down on the other side of the grill. Each carried a rifle. One of them opened up for us.

"Okay, Maxison," he said. "Go ahead. The doc's just finished."

I released the clutch and drove past the guard. I didn't look at him.

We were in.

5

The white-tiled post-mortem room was clean and cool. A strong smell of antiseptics hung in the air. The body of a woman lay on the porcelain table, partially covered by a coarse bleached sheet. Her shaved head rested in the hollow of a small wooden block. She didn't look human, but like a realistic waxwork in an exhibition of horrors.

The doctor, a small, pudgy man, clear-skinned and tanned, was washing his hands in the deep sink. Steam from the hot water dimmed his glasses.

"She's all yours," he said, glancing round. "The poor devil killed herself by swallowing powdered glass. I'd like to know where she got it from."

Somewhere in the jail a woman began to utter clear, high-pitched peals of mirthless laughter as though she were being tortured by having her feet tickled. The sound set my teeth on edge; it was shrill, like a pencil squeaking on a slate.

The doctor scowled, came towards us drying his hands.

"I'm going to report that woman," he said, irritably. "She shouldn't be here."

Neither Maxison nor I said anything. We stood around, looking at the doctor, then at the dead woman. I felt spooked.

"It's time Edna Robbins was kicked out of here," the doctor went on. "She's a sadist. I'm not saying she drove that woman crazy, but she couldn't have helped her."

He was addressing me, so I said, "Who's Edna Robbins?"

"The Head Wardress," he said, tossing the towel into a white enamelled receptable. "You're new here, aren't you?" He shook his head. "She's a bad lot. Well, I can't stay gossiping," he went on. "I'll let you have the death certificate. You can pick-it up at my office on your way back."

Maxison said he'd do that.

The doctor was crossing the room when the door opened and a woman came in. She was small, square-shouldered, and her blonde

hair shone like brass. It was swept up to the top of her head, a tiny blue velvet bow holding it in place. She wore a black, smartly tailored dress relieved by white collars and cuffs.

"Finished ?" she said to the doctor. Her voice made me think of shiny steel rods.

He grunted, went away without looking at her.

She stared after him, chewing her thin under-lip, then nodded to Maxison.

"Get that body out as quickly as you can," she said. "I want Mitchell to clean up here."

"All right, Miss Robbins," Maxison said, giving her a scared look.

He hoisted the coffin on to the trestles he had already set up.

The woman sauntered over to the body on the table and stared down at it. There was something about her small, sharp face that gave me goose pimples. Her nose was small, her mouth almost lipless, and her eyes ice-blue. Her straight eyebrows shot up to her high forehead and gave her a devilish look.

She lifted the sheet and examined the doctor's large stitches

with interest. I couldn't take my eyes off her, and she looked up abruptly. Her eyes probed me. It was an odd feeling, as if she could see beyond my clothes.

"You're new here, aren't you?" she asked abruptly.

I nodded, "Sure," I said, and went on unpacking Maxison's bag. I took out his tool kit, took it over to rum.

"What's the matter with your mouth?" she said suddenly. "It looks swollen."

My tongue automatically touched the rubber pads, and I had a bad moment.

"A bee kissed me," I said, turning away from her. "I didn't think it showed."

I felt her eyes on me, then she walked across the room to the door.

"Make haste," she said to Maxison and went out.

I had been watching her as she crossed the room. She had narrow hips, and her legs were good. When the door closed behind her I straightened up, wiped off my face with my handkerchief.

"A nice little thing," I said, under my breath. "She knows how to use her eyes."

Maxison was also sweating. "She's dangerous," he said.

"I'll say," I agreed, and stepped over to the door. I opened it, peered into the passage. There was no one about. "Well, here goes," I went on, closing the door. I took off the long black overcoat and shoved it in the receptacle under the towel the doctor had used. I took off my spectacles and removed the rubber pads in my mouth. "You know what to do," I said to Maxison. "Get the false bottom out and hide it under the box. Take your time about preparing the body, but be ready to finish quick when I get back."

He nodded, his eyes popping.

"Watch your step, Maxison," I went on. "No funny business."

The mad woman upstairs began to laugh again, hysterical and unhurried. The sound gave me a chill down my spine.

I went to the door and peered into the passage again.

Mitchell was out there, waiting. He nodded to me.

"Okay?" I said.

"So far," he returned. His eyes were bright with excitement and fright. "For Gawd's sake be careful."

"I'll be careful," I said.

"The stairs are around the corner. The morning inspection's through. You've got a clear hour before they go around again. Look out for Robbins. She's the one to watch."

I nodded. "I'll watch her. You know what to do?"

"Yeah; but I hope I don't have to do it."

"So do I," I said, and walked quickly down the passage.

At the corner I paused, looked round. No one was about. Voices came from a room near by, but I kept on, crossed the passage to the

stairs, went up them.

The stairs were broad and led directly to the upper floor. I walked on, passed the steel grill that guarded the circular gallery housing the cells, and mounted to the second floor. Halfway up I had to pass a convict who was on hands and knees, scrubbing the stairs. He shifted as he saw me so I could pass. I felt his eyes on me and I guessed he was wondering who I was. I kept on until I reached the top floor.

I knew then that I was only a few yards from Miss Wonderly. The thought gave me a queer feeling of panic and exhilaration. As I reached the top of the stairs, I saw the grill gate facing me. That didn't worry me. Mitchell had supplied me with a duplicate pass-key.

As I crossed the passage and reached the .grill, the mad woman suddenly gave a high-pitched scream. It rose, swelled, and hung in the air like a shriek of a damned soul. It was so loud, so close, so unexpected, that it froze me. For a moment I was ready to run blindly down the stairs, but I recovered my nerve, started forward again. As I was about to take the pass-key from my pocket, I paused.

I felt someone watching me. I turned.

Edna Robbins was standing in a doorway half-way down the passage. Her hard little face was expressionless, her slim, square-shouldered body without movement.

I felt my heart lurch, but I kept still. We stood there for a long moment looking at each other. She was suspicious, but she wasn't alarmed. The guard's uniform reassured her, but I knew I couldn't give her time to think. I walked slowly towards her.

She waited, her eyes searching my face.

"Any trouble up here?" I asked, when I was within six feet of her.

Her face remained expressionless. "What makes you think there is?" she asked.

"I heard that scream. I was on the next floor, so I came up," I said, looking her over.

"A real conscientious screw," she sneered, but I could see my look had registered. "You've no business up here. Beat it!"

"Okay," I said, shrugging. "You don't have to be mad at me." I let my eyes drift up and down her body. "I wouldn't like anything to happen

to a cute trick like you."

"Wouldn't you?" she said. "Come inside and tell me why."

I hesitated, then walked past her into a small room fitted as an office. It was as hard and clean and masculine as she was.

She leaned her hips against the edge of the desk and folded her arms.

"Haven't seen you before," she said.

"I'm one of the new guards from Station Headquarters," I explained, and sat on the edge of the desk beside her. We were close; my shoulder touched her shoulder. She had to turn her head to look at me.

"I've seen you somewhere before," she said, a puzzled, curious look in her eyes.

"I saw you yesterday," I lied glibly, "I was manning the barricade when you passed."

Her eyes narrowed. "You look like that new mortician in the P.M. room," she said.

I grinned. "He's my brother. We're often mistaken for each other. He's fatter in the face than I am, and he hasn't a way with women."

"You have?" The sneer in her voice was pronounced.

I winked at her. "I go for women in a big way. They go for me, too."

"Maybe that's why you came sneaking up to the women's quarters," she said.

"The dame's scream scared me. I thought she'd got hold of you."

A thin wolfish expression lit her face. "They don't get hold of me," she said quietly. "They know better."

"Tough, eh?" I said, admiring her. I leaned closer to her. "I could go for you in a big way."

She stood up and walked to the door. "Dust," she said, "and don't come up here again. If you hear any more screams forget it. There's nothing on this floor I can't handle."

"I can believe it," I said, walking to the door. "Well, so long, lady; if

there's anything I can do for you, you'll find me on the next floor."

"Scram," she said impatiently.

She came to the head of the stairs to watch me go. I went down and along the passage of B floor. I waited a moment, listening. I heard her go back to her office. The door clicked shut.

I gave her a moment, then moving quickly, I ran up the stairs again, crossed the landing, whipped out the pass-key and unlocked the grill. I moved with urgent haste. My mouth was dry, my heart pounded. I slid back the grill. It moved easily, without sound.

I stepped through and slid the grill into place, locked it.

Then I walked down the narrow gallery towards Miss Wonderly's cell.

6

The first three cells were empty. There was a smell of disinfectant and unwashed bodies in the air. I made no sound on the rubber flooring, but I walked on my toes down the narrow gangway, one side of which was the row of cells, and on the other side the high wire screen guarding the sheer drop into the main hall of the prison below. The mesh of the wire screen was so fine that it was not possible to see through it into the lower galleries.

There was movement in the fourth cell. I paused, peered in. A fat old woman, raddled, decaying, grinned toothlessly at me.

"Hello, pretty boy," she said, waddling to the bars. She grasped the bars with raw hands. "Ain't seen a man for ten years. Coming to see me, precious?"

My face was stiff with fright. I shook my head, edged past her, my back scraping along the wire screen.

"After the young 'un, are you?" she leered. "You'll like her. But watch Bugsey. She's in the next cell. She hates screws."

I edged on, staring at the old woman fascinated. As I came to the sixth cell an arm shot through the bars, a thin, sinewy hand gripped my wrist.

I started back, trying to drag myself free. The grip bit into my flesh. The bloodless fingers were terribly strong.

My face was damp with sweat. Butterflies fluttered in my stomach.

I allowed the hand to pull me to the bars so that my face was against the cold steel of the door. I found myself face to face with a young blonde whose mad burning eyes glared ferociously at me. She hissed at me through clenched teeth. Little flecks of foam bubbled on her lips. My hair moved on the back of my neck, my heart skipped a beat. Her other hand whipped through the bars and caught my coat collar.

My heart began to pound again. I was scared.

"Hello, copper," she said. "I've been waiting for you." She closed one eyelid in a gruesome wink. "I'm going to kill you," she went on, in a stage whisper.

"No, you're not," I said, bracing my feet against the bars. "I'm going to get you out of here."

She sounded off with her crazy, high-pitched laugh. It sent spiders' legs up and down my back.

"They won't let me out," she said. Her smile was sad and cunning. "They know what I'll do to them. I'm going to do it to you." Her face tightened, her eyes narrowed. "I'm going to tear your throat out."

I got my feet against the bars, and suddenly heaved back-backwards. I broke her hold and I fell against the wire screen, slid to the floor.

She glared at me, beating her hands against the bars. As I struggled to sit up, she flopped down on her knees, grabbed my ankle. I kicked at her with my free foot, but I couldn't reach her because of the bars. She held my ankle between her two hands and hauled. I choked back a yell of fright as I felt myself sliding across the rubber floor. I grabbed at the wire screen, but she jerked, breaking my hold. She hauled me towards her like a landed fish.

I kicked and twisted, but I couldn't get my leg free. The raddled old woman was watching, giggling with excitement.

"She'll cut your heart out," she whispered to me.

Sweat ran down my face, and I struggled and writhed in blind panic. There was something about the mad woman's face and the way she laughed and muttered to herself that scared me silly.

I was now against the bars. She released my leg and grabbed my coat again. Our faces were

close. I could smell her sour breath. She turned me sick with horror.

"What's the matter with you?" I panted. "I'm going to get you out of here. You and the kid next door."

"You're not touching her," she snarled. "They've done enough to her. I'll stop you and I'll stop them touching her again. Come closer, copper. I want to get my hands on your dirty neck."

I tried to pull away, but she dragged me closer, her hooked fingers moving in little jerks up to my neck. She was so intent watching my face that she didn't see that I'd drawn back my leg.

I placed my foot gently on her chest, then kicked out with all my

strength.

She shot over backwards, the breath rushing out of her body. Released, I staggered to my feet, reeled against the wire screen. I was trembling, and could scarcely stand.

"That gave you a fright," Edna Robbins sneered.

I went cold, turned.

Edna was standing just inside the grill. She was watching me. Her small, sharp nose looked pinched, her eyes dangerous.

The raddled old woman had disappeared to the back of her cell. The mad woman lay on the floor, gasping and wheezing for breath.

I straightened my torn jacket, ran my fingers through my hair. I felt like hell.

Edna came down the gallery.

"I told you to scram, didn't I ?" she said bitingly. "All right, wise guy, you're going before the Warden."

I backed away, my eyes darting to the cell next to the mad woman's. I could see a woman lying on the cot; a woman with honey-coloured hair. My heart lurched. I knew who that was.

"Don't get mad," I said in a croaking voice. "I didn't mean any harm. I wanted to see what this cuckoo looked like."

Edna smiled spitefully. "Well, you've seen her. I've a mind to stick you in with her and let her

work on you. Come on, you rat, you're finished here. The Warden will fire you out."

I knew then it was Edna or me. I eyed her small body over. She looked capable, but I was sure I could handle her. I had to get my hands on her throat before she could raise the alarm.

I slouched towards her, looking crestfallen, sullen.

"You might give a guy a break," I muttered, as I reached her.

"You'll get no break from me ..." she began.

I shot out my hands, seeking her throat. Then I got the surprise of

my life. Moving like a lizard, she caught my wrists, pulled me towards her, bent. The next second I was flying through the air. I thudded against steel bars, bounced to the floor. I lay there, stunned.

"I told you I could handle anything on this floor," she said, standing over me. "And that includes you." She drew back her foot and kicked me in the face. "Get up, and come quietly, or I'll break your goddamn neck."

Gritting my teeth, cold with rage, I rolled towards her, grabbed at her legs. I heaved. I heard her quick gasp as she lost her balance, but she was smart enough to throw herself forward, breaking her fall on me.

I clutched at her body, hard as steel under my fingers. I tried to jab her in the face with my head.

She hit me in the eye with bony knuckles, rammed her knee in my chest and caught hold of my wrist with both hands. She was strong and full of jiu-jitsu tricks. She was getting a lock on my arm which threatened to break it. Pain crawled into my brain.

"I'll teach you to fight me," she panted, heaving down on my arm.

Somehow I rolled over, taking her with me. She clung to my arm like a bulldog as I threw her about. Each heave I gave sent fresh waves of pain up my arm. My sinews cracked.

I caught a glimpse of her blonde head and I slammed a punch at it. My fist caught her in the neck. She let go of my arm, flopped on the floor.

I got slowly to my knees, my right arm useless. There was| no keeping her off. She raised up, swearing softly, her blonde hair down to her shoulders. She came back at me. I was ready for

her, and socked her in the ribs with a left that travelled about three inches.

She went over, completed a somersault and was on her feet before I could get to mine. She scared me. She was as tough and as dangerous as any man.

This time she didn't rush me, but spun on her heel and ran towards the grill gate. I was after her in a lurching run. Whatever happened she mustn't give the alarm.

I grabbed her as her finger was reaching for the red button of the alarm bell. I tried to close with her.

She clutched me to her, fell straight back, her feet in my stomach. I shot over her head, crashed against the grill. By the time I sorted myself out, she was climbing over me to get at the bell. I got my hands around her waist and pulled her down. She bit, punched and scratched. We rolled over. I pounded her body. At first she hit back, but after three or four of my punches she tried to keep them out with her elbows. They were hurting her as I meant them to hurt. She was panting and sobbing with rage. I caught hold of her throat, but she dug her thumbs in my eyes. I let go. I heaved away from her, my eyes streaming. She staggered to her feet, came at me again, wobbly, but out to finish me. I set myself and hit her with a long, raking left in her throat.

Her mouth opened, and she gave a thin wail as she fell against the door of the mad woman's cell.

There was a moment's pause. I, on my knees, she, with her shoulders against the bars, her knees buckling; then two greedy, claw-like hands shot between the bars and closed round her throat. She gave a wild scream as she felt the hands touch her. Her scream was throttled back into her throat almost before it sounded.

The mad woman, yammering with excitement, pulled backwards. The bars were a shade too narrow for Edna's head to pass through. She couldn't scream, because the mad woman's hands were squeezing her windpipe. She kicked and twisted. One of her shoes flew off and hit me in the face. Her knees burst through her stockings. I couldn't move. I stood against the grill, shivering, staring.

The mad woman continued to pull, bracing hard with her feet. Edna tried to reach inside the cell, but her arms weren't long enough. She looked at me, her eyes starting out of her head, her tongue swelling in her mouth. The mad woman gave a sudden jerk. A horrible muffled sound came from Edna's throat as her head passed through the bars, leaving skin behind. One side of

her face was a mass of blood.

"I've got her," the mad woman whispered to me. "Thinks she can handle anything up here, does she? We'll see."

She sat on the floor, her arms raised, her hands round Edna's throat.

The raddled old woman tried to see what was going on, but she couldn't. She hammered on the door with her hands, cursing in a rasping voice.

Edna was arched backwards, her heels digging into the rubber flooring, her head through the bars. Her hands clutched at the bars for support and to relieve her weight from her head. Blood from her face ran down on to the floor, dripped on to her Nylon hose.

The mad woman, grinning at me, not looking at Edna, began to take in and let out slow, long breaths. Her shoulders seemed to grow lumpy, sweat appeared on her face.

I hooked my fingers into the wire mesh of the screen, and watched.

The raddled old woman, her face against the bars, suddenly stood still, listening.

Edna's face, where it wasn't blood-stained, was liver-coloured. Her eyes stood out, blind. Her tongue came out blue between bluish lips. Her slender body writhed. One of her hands began to beat on the bars, mechanically, without force.

The mad woman nodded to me, closed her eyes and strained. Edna's hand stopped beating on the bars. There was a muffled crack, almost immediately, a sharper one. Edna did not writhe now. She sagged, her head still trapped between the bars.

Sick with horror, I stepped past her dragging feet towards the next cell.

The mad woman let go of Edna's throat, sprang to the bars and reached for me. I pulled my gun and beat down her hands with it.

She jumped back, howling.

Even with that horror so close to me, I could now only think of Miss Wonderly.

She was in there. She lay flat on the cot, her eyes closed, her hair like spilt honey on the coarse pillow.

I unlocked the cell, stepped in.

The mad woman's fingers grabbed my arm. Half-crazy with fear, revolted, I struck her between the eyes with my gun butt.

Her eyes rolled back and she dropped.

Shuddering, I snatched up Miss Wonderly and blundered from the cell.

The raddled old woman began to scream.

7

I slid back the door of the elevator, peered into the passage. Mitchell, wide-eyed, hopping with excitement, was standing at the far end. He waved to me.

Up on A floor the old woman continued to scream.

I ducked back into the elevator, scooped up Miss Wonderly's limp form in my arms and stepped into the passage. As I did so, Mitchell waved me back, then turned and bolted up the stairs.

Warned, I laid Miss Wonderly on the floor, reached for my gun.

A prison guard, automatic rifle wedged into his hip, came running around the corner. I didn't give him a chance. My .38 cracked once. The guard stumbled, curled up on the floor. His automatic rifle fell out of his hands, exploded. The slug brought plaster down from the ceiling on my head.

I turned, snatched up Miss Wonderly, tossed her over my shoulder. She moved feebly, but I gripped her tight. I ran.

Somewhere in the building an alarm bell began to ring. Its jangling note mingled with the cries of the prisoners, a great rattling of steel doors, and the old woman's screams upstairs.

Half-way down the passage a door flew open, two guards spilled out. I shot one of them in the leg, the other ducked back into the room, kicked the door shut. I sent a slug through the door, heard the guard yell.

I kept on, moving more slowly, turning to look back at every step. I was fighting mad, not

going to be beaten now I'd got so far.

I heard heavy feet pounding down the stairs, and I broke into a run. The P.M. room was too far away. I knew I couldn't make it in time. I pushed open the first door I came to, stepped into a small, coldly furnished office. Again I put Miss Wonderly on the floor. She opened her eyes, struggled to sit up, but I pushed her back.

"Stay still, honey," I said. "I'm going to get you out of here."

It gave me a hell of a bang to see the expression in her eyes when she recognized me. She caught her breath, but she lay still, watched me.

I jumped to the door, knelt and peered into the passage. Four guards, one with a Thompson, were staring down at the bodies in the passage. I picked off the guy with the Thompson. The others made a frantic dash for the stairs, disappeared.

I grabbed Miss Wonderly, kissed her, and whizzed down the passage with her. I reached the bend as someone opened up with a chopper. One of the slugs nicked the heel of my shoe. I stumbled, made an effort, rounded the bend.

I burst into the P.M. room, closed the door.

Maxison was crouched against the wall, his face livid with fright. He gave a gulping gasp when he saw me, but he didn't or couldn't move.

I ran over to the coffin, swung Miss Wonderly off my shoulder and into the box in one movement. She sat up, her face stiff, her eyes bewildered.

"Lie down, and don't make a sound," I panted.

She looked at the coffin, and her mouth opened to scream. I put my hand over her mouth, but she struggled, frantic with fear.

I hated doing it, but there was no other way out. I half closed my fist and hit her on the side of her jaw. Her head snapped back, she passed out cold.

Feverishly I straightened her out in the box, whipped in the false bottom and turned the screws. Then I grabbed the long, black overcoat, struggled into it. I put on my glasses, put the pads into my mouth. I stepped across to Maxison and dragged him to the porcelain table.

"Get that body in," I snarled at him, and grabbed the stiff, cold shoulders.

Somehow he managed to pull himself together, and taking the woman's feet, he helped me across the room with her, and together we lowered the body into the coffin. It only just fitted, and I knew the lid would have to be forced down. I snatched up the lid, had it on the coffin as the door was flung open.

Flaggerty and three prison guards stood in the doorway.

I acted like I was scared, backing away and throwing up my hands. Maxison didn't have to act. He thought his last hour had come.

Flaggerty, sweating, white with rage, gave us a quick glance, then looked around the room.

"Anyone been in here?" he grated, glaring at Maxison.

Maxison shook his head. He couldn't speak he was so scared.

"Come on," Flaggerty snarled to the guards, and turned, then he turned back, walked to the coffin and threw off the lid. He stared down at the dead woman, his eyes narrowed, his lips grimacing. He made a gesture of rage, stamped out.

The door slammed.

I wiped my face, tried to recover my breath.

"Take it easy," I said to Maxison. "This is only the half of it."

I grabbed a screw-driver and screwed down the lid of the coffin. I had just finished when the door opened again and Clancy, the guard, came in. His face was red with suppressed excitement.

"Whatja know, fellas?" he said. "That guy Cain's gate-crashed the jail. He's snatched his floozie."

"You don't say," I returned, wiping my face and hands on a towel. "Got him yet?"

Clancy shook his head. "He can't get away. Flaggerty's out of his mind. He's going through the jail with a tooth comb." He gaped at me. "What the hell's happened to your face?"

"One of the guards thought I was Cain," I said. "He pushed me around before Flaggerty stopped him."

"They're sure crazy," Clancy said. "I've never seen so many nuts under one roof. Well, they'll catch Cain. He can't get out."

"Sure of that?" I said.

"I guess so. How can he?

"How did he get in?"

"Yeah," Clancy said, shaking his head. "I hand it to that guy. He's smart, and he's got guts."

"How soon can we move?" I asked. "I don't want much more of this shooting."

"You stick around. No one's allowed to leave until they've found him," Clancy told me.

I shrugged, lit a cigarette. I wondered how long Miss Wonderly would remain out, and if she'd start to scream when she came round. I sweated to think about it.

We sat around for ten minutes or so, then shooting began again.

Clancy went to the door, peered out. "Sounds like they've cornered him," he said. "Trouble on B floor."

The alarm bell began to ring.

"Now what's up?" Clancy demanded, frowning. "What do they want to ring the bell for?"

Mitchell appeared suddenly. "Come on, mug!" he bawled to Clancy. "We gotta jail break on our hands. The prisoners are loose."

Clancy snatched up his rifle.

"Who let 'em loose?" he asked, rushing to the door.

"Cain, I guess," Mitchell said, pushing Clancy ahead of him. He looked back at me, winked. "Come on, everyone's to go to B floor. Orders."

They went running down the passage.

I grinned at Maxison.

"Mitchell let 'em loose. I hope he'll be all right," I said. "Come on, we're going."

Between as we hoisted the coffin on our shoulders and made for the exit. The coffin weighed a ton, and we were staggering by the time we'd reached the gate of the prison block.

The lone guard stared at us, lifted his rifle.

We stopped.

"It's okay," I gasped. "I've got a permit to leave. Lemme get this coffin on board and I'll give it to you."

He hesitated, and I went on past him into the courtyard, where the hearse was waiting. He followed us.

Maxison and I shoved the coffin into the hearse, slammed the door.

The guard still threatened us with his gun. His round, red face was puzzled.

"Flaggerty said no one was to leave," he grumbled. "You can't go, so don't you think you can."

"I tell you Flaggerty's given us a permit," I said angrily. "Give it to him," I went on to Maxison. "You got it in your pocket."

With a dazed expression on his face, Maxison put his hand in his inside pocket. The guard swung the gun away from me, covering Maxison, suspicion in his eyes.

I jumped, hit the guard on the jaw, snatched his rifle from him as he fell. I belted him over the head with the butt.

"Come on," I said to Maxison, and bundled him into the hearse. I drove across the courtyard, through the first gate which was open, and stopped outside the outer gate which was closed.

Franklin came out of the lodge. He eyed us over.

"Getting out while the going's good?" he asked, grinning.

"Sure," I said. "We gave the permit to the guard at the main block. They've got a prison break on their hands now."

He shrugged. "I'm keeping out of it. I'm a man of peace." He walked to the gate and opened it. "So long, fellas."

I nodded and drove on

There was only one more obstacle, the barricade. I kept my gun by my side, drove steadily down the sandy track. I could see no guards. The barricade blocked my exit, but no one was there to guard it.

The sounds of shooting and yells came to us from the jail. I guess everyone was too busy to bother about guarding a tree.

Maxison and I got down, rolled the barricade aside; then we got back

into the hearse.

We'd done it.

Chapter Five
POINT COUNTER POINT

1

THE Martello Hotel, Key West, overlooked the Atlantic Ocean. From our private balcony, shaded by a green and white awning, we could look down at the Roosevelt Boulevard, which was almost deserted; houses were shuttered and dogs slept on the sidewalks. It was noon, and the heat was fierce. Away to our right we could see low emerald islands in a shimmering, painted sea beneath high-piled lavender clouds. Steamers and other craft worked their way through the old Nor'west Channel, a chartered course taken for centuries.

Wearing trunks, sun-glasses and sandals, I lolled in a wicker arm-chair. A highball, clinking with ice, stood on the chair arm. I relaxed in the heat, stared with narrowed, impatient eyes out to sea.

Miss Wonderly sat by my side. She had on a white swim-suit that clung to her curves like a nervous mountaineer rounding Devil's Corner. A straw hat, the size of a cartwheel, shaded her face. A magazine lay on her lap.

Minutes went past. I moved slightly to reach my cigarettes. She patted my hand as I picked up my lighter. I smiled at her.

"Pretty nice, isn't it?" I said.

She nodded, sighed, took off her hat. Her soft, honey-coloured hair fell about her shoulders. She looked pretty nice herself.

We had been at the hotel for five days. The jail break was a distant nightmare. We didn't talk about it. For the first two or three days, Miss Wonderly had been in a bad shape. She had bad nights, bad dreams. She was scared to leave the hotel, scared ii someone came into the room. Hetty and I hadn't left her for a moment. Hetty had been wonderful. She was with us now.

We had taken Miss Wonderly from the jail straight to Tim's boat. Hetty, Tim and I had gone with her, and we had somehow managed to slip through the cordon Killeano had flung round the coast and reached Key West. Tim had gone back to Paradise Palms the following morning with the boat.

friendliness, was a good spot for convalescing. Miss Wonderly had picked up faster than I had hoped. Now she was almost normal.

"All right, kid?" I asked, smiling at her.

"Yes," she said, stretching. "And you?"

"Sure, this is much more like the vacation I was hoping to find in Paradise Palms."

"How long shall we stay here?" she asked, suddenly, abruptly.

I glanced at her. "There's no hurry," I said. "I want to get you well. We can stay here as long as you like."

She turned on her side so she could watch me.

"What's going to happen to us?" she asked, giving me her hand.

I frowned. "Happen? What should happen?"

"Darling, perhaps I haven't the right to ask, but is it going on between you and me?" Her face flushed.

"Do you want it to go on?" I asked, smiling at her. "I'm not much of a guy to go places with."

"I could stand it if you could," she said seriously.

"I'm crazy about you," I told her, "but I don't know how you would fit in with my kind of life. You see, I haven't learned to settle down. I can't imagine myself settling down. It wouldn't be much of a life for you."

She looked down at our hands, joined together.

"You're going back there, aren't you?" she said,

"Back where?" I asked sharply.

"Please, darling," she said, gripping my hands. "Don't be like that. You are going back there."

"You mustn't worry," I said, smiling at her. "I don't know what I'm going to do."

"But you will, when Tim comes. You're waiting for Tim, aren't you?"

"Well, yes," I said, looking out to sea. "I'm waiting for Tim."

"And when he comes, you'll go back with him?"

"I might."

"You will."

"I might," I repeated. "I don't know. It depends what's happened."

She gripped my hand hard.

"Darling, please don't go back. I didn't think we would get away. When I was in that awful jail I thought I should never see you again. I thought they would catch you and you'd be hurt. But we did get away, and I have you with me. It would be wicked to put all this in danger again, wouldn't it?"

"Don't worry," I said. "I have a job to finish. I like to dot my i's and cross my t's. It's the way I'm made."

"No, it isn't," she said. "No one's made like that." I am.

"Darling—don't do this." Her hands trembled in mine. "Let it go—please—this time . . ."

I shook my head slightly.

She took her hands away. "You and your pride," she said, her voice suddenly hard, angry. "You don't care about this. You don't care about us." She drew in a deep breath, burst out, "You've seen too many gangster pictures—that's what's wrong with you."

"It's not like that," I said.

"Yes, it is," she said. Her voice was now elaborately controlled. "Yon want revenge. You think Killeano has crowded you, and you have to shake your reputation in his face. You can't resist doing that. You like long chances. You think it's big and smart to go back alone against that mob who stop at nothing. Just because Bogart and Cagney do it for a living, you have to do it too."

I took a pull at my highball, shook my head.

"It wasn't as if they beat you, burnt you with cigarettes, took off your clothes and paraded you before a crowd of grinning prison guards," she went on, her voice low. "They didn't come into your cell at night, did they ? You didn't have a crazy woman whispering through the bars at you—awful, filthy whispering ..."

"Honey . . ."

"Well, did you? I'm the one who suffered, not you. I don't want revenge. I want you. I don't want anything or anyone but you. I'm out of it. I'm glad to be out of it. God! I'm glad to be out of it. But you want to go back. You want to fight them. You want to avenge me. But I don't want to be avenged." Her voice broke suddenly. "Darling—can't you think of me a little—can't you let this one thing go—for me? For us?"

I patted her arm, stood up.

There was a long silence, then I heard her get up. She came and stood by my side, slipped her arm through mine.

"Was that what you meant when you said I wouldn't fit in with your kind of life?" she asked.

I looked down at her, put my arm round her, pulled her to me. "Yeah," I said. "I'm not made to be pushed around. I'm sorry, kid, but I'm going back. I said I'd fix Killeano, and I'm going to fix him. I feel a heel doing this to you, but I have to five with myself, and I'd never forgive myself if I let that rat slip through my hands."

"All right, darling," she said. "I see how it is. I'm sorry I didn't understand before. Forgive me?"

I kissed her.

"Darling," she said after a while, "do you want me to wait for you?"

I stared at her. "You're certainly going to wait for me," I said.

She shook her head. "Not certainly," she said. "I'll wait, on one condition. Otherwise I won't be here when you come back. I mean it."

"And the condition?"

"You're not to kill Killeano. Up to now you have defended yourself. If you kill Killeano it will be murder. That mustn't be. Will you promise?"

"Now, I can't promise that," I said "He might get me in spot——"

"That's different. I mean you're not to go gunning for him. If he attacks you, then that's different. But you're not to hunt him down and shoot him as you have been planning to do."

"Okay," I said. "I promise."

I held her close, then suddenly I felt her back stiffen. I looked over my shoulder.

Tim's boat was not more than a mile out to sea. He was coming fast.

2

Davis, Tim and I sat around the table in Tim's sitting-room, a bottle of Scotch within reach, full glasses in our hands.

Davis had just come in. It was early evening, and Tim and I hadn't been back long from Key West.

"I've been busy," Davis said, grinning at me, "but before I sound off, how's the kid?"

"She's all right," I said. "They gave her hell in that jail, but she didn't lie down under it. She's fine now."

Davis looked across at Tim, who shrugged.

"Of course, she didn't want me to come back," I said, rubbing my jaw, "but she'll get over that too."

"Well, so long as she's okay," Davis said, combing his hair and looking puzzled, "that's swell."

Tim said, "The trouble with this guy is he won't leave trouble alone. There was a sweet scene when Hetty heard he was coming back——"

"All right," I interrupted curtly. "Let's skip the domestic details. What's new?"

"Plenty," Davis said, lighting a cigarette. "Flaggerty's dead for a start. Howja like that? He was killed by one of the convicts: cracked his skull with an axe."

"That's one less for me to bother about," I said.

"Yeah. And here's a juicy morsel. Killeano's taken over Flaggerty's job. He won't release the jail break to the press. I guess it's too close to the election for bad news to be told to the trusting public."

"What happened to Mitchell?"

"He skipped out. I saw him before he went, and he gave me the whole story. I hand it to you, pal. It was a pretty smooth effort. I wrote it up, but the editor killed it after consulting Killeano. The public doesn't know a thing about it."

"And Maxison?"

"He managed to keep his nose clean, but only just. Laura supported his story, and after sweating him, Killeano turned him loose. He's back at work now, but, I must say, he looks like a fugitive from the Lost Horizon. There's one thing you ought to know. They've turned up Brodey's body."

"He's dead?" I said sharply.

"Yeah. He was found at Dayden Beach. Your Luger by his side. Guess who killed him?"

"I know," I said, clenching my fists. "So I'm wanted for three murders now?"

"You sure are," Davis said, looking smug.

"Too bad," I said, took a drink and eyed him over. "What else?"

"That's all the topical news," he said, reached inside his pocket and took out a five-dollar bill. He tossed it over to me. "Picked that up at the Casino a couple of nights back."

I turned the note over, held it up to the light. It looked all right to me.

"So what?"

"It's a dud."

I stared at the note again. It still looked fine to me.

"Sure?"

"Yeah. I had it checked by my bank. They say it's a first-class job, but it's a dud all right."

"I'll say it's a first-class job," I said. "You got it from the Casino?"

He nodded. "It was with two other fives I won. They were all right; this a phoney."

"W ell, that's something," I said, and slipped the note into my pocket.

"Hey, I want a good one in return," Davis said, alarmed. "And while we are on the important subject of money, you also owe me a hundred bucks."

"I do?"

"Yeah. I've been spending your money. Guess what. I've hired a private dick to dig up dirt on your pals. Howja like that?"

"You did? That's a smart idea. Did he find anything?"

"Did he—hell!" Davis rubbed his hands gleefully, "it wasn't such a dumb idea. One thing he did find out was that cat-house you're interested in bums five times the electricity it did two years ago. That anything?"

"Only if it means there's been some electrical equipment installed."

"That's the way I figured it. It'd be a swell hide-out for a coining plant, wouldn't it?"

"All right," I said. "What else?"

"Don't rush us," Davis said, grinning. "This dick ain't been on the job a couple of days. He's turned up something on Gomez if he interests you."

"Gomez?" I said, frowning. "I don't know where I can fit him in."

"Well, let's skip Gomez then."

"What did he find out?"

"Gomez runs human freight into Cuba."

I studied my finger-nails. "Go on," I said.

"That's it. He does it in a big way. He has three boats, a . bunch of boys working for him, and he gets a thousand dollars a head."

"Who's he carrying?"

"The revolution boys. There's a lot of traffic going on between this coast and Cuba. He's smuggling in guns as well. From what I hear there'll be another bust-up in Cuba before long."

"Too bad for him if Killeano pinched one of his boats," I said, thoughtfully.

"He ain't likely to," Davis said. "He must be giving Gomez plenty of protection."

"But suppose Killeano in a fit of zeal pinched Gomez's boat, what do you think Gomez would do?"

"I know damn well what he'd do. He'd take a crack at Killeano," Davis said, eyeing me doubtfully. "Why should Killeano have a fit of zeal?"

"He's just taken over the police department; the election is close. It'd be a good publicity stunt to make a sudden clean-up on that racket—especially if the press gave him a spread."

Davis's fat face creased. "Now what the hell are you cooking up?"

"Where does Gomez keep his boats?"

"Search me," Davis returned, looking at Tim and then at me. "This dick—Clairbold's his name (hell of a name, ain't it?)—fell over the dirt accidentally. He wasn't looking for it. He was sniffing around in Lois's apartment trying to find any letters Killeano might have written to Lois. It was my idea. I reckoned we could crucify Killeano if we could get hold of some of his mushy letters and print them. Clairbold was digging around in Lois's bedroom when Gomez and another guy marched into the outer room. Clairbold ducks behind a curtain and hears Gomez planning to run a bunch of nationals over to Cuba tonight, and to bring another bunch back the night after."

I nodded. "Nice work." I said. "Did he find any letters?"

"No. He skipped out as soon as Gomez quit. He didn't think it was too healthy to hang around."

"This might develop, Jed," I said. "It's worth going after. Can you get hold of the dick?"

"Yeah. Can get him now if you want him."

"Do that. Tell him to hook himself on to Gomez and follow him wherever he goes. I want to find out where Gomez keeps his boats, and where he'll land those Cubans tonight. Tell him to call back here. We'll wait."

Davis nodded, went over to the telephone.

Tim eyed me thoughtfully. "Can't see where this is getting you," he said.

I moved impatiently. "I'm getting soft," I said. "Know what that kid of mine made me promise?"

He shook his head.

"I wouldn't kill Killeano. Imagine. She thought I was going straight into his office and was going to fill him full of lead. Can you beat that?"

"Well, weren't you?" Tim asked, a sly grin in his eyes.

"That was the general idea," I said, scowling, "but how was I to know she'd know?"

"So you're not going to fix Killeano?" Tim said, surprised. "Then why come back here?"

"I promised I wouldn't kill him, but that doesn't mean I'm not going to fix him," I said grimly. "I have to work it differently now. It'll take longer, but it'll work out the same way- I have to find someone else to do it for me: Gomez, for instance."

Davis came back from the telephone.

"Clairbold says Gomez is at the jai alai court right now. He reckons Gomez will make the trip after the game."

"Okay," I said.

"He'll come over here after he's seen Gomez off," Davis said. "You'll like this guy. He's good."

I put my feet on the table. "Stick around," I said. "We may be busy in a little while."

"Not me," Davis said hurriedly. "I know when you're planning to start something. I smell it in the air. Me—I'm going home."

I laughed. "Suit yourself," I said, handing him a hundred-dollar note and a five spot. "You'll have a fine spread for your front page in a day or so."

"Don't tell me," Davis said with an exaggerated shudder. "Let it come as a surprise."

3

Clairbold was a young blond man in a brown suit and a cocoa-coloured straw hat with a brown and blue tropical band. He followed Tim into the sitting-room, and looked at me the way a morbid sightseer looks at a messy street accident.

I eyed him over. He was very young. His face was pink and plump, and the blond beard on his chin was carelessly shaved. His eyes were inquisitive and a little scared. His teeth projected, giving him a look of a young, amiable rabbit. He didn't look a shamus; that, of course, was in his favour.

"Park your fanny," I said, waving to a chair, "and have a drink."

He edged into the chair as if it was a bear-trap. Then he took off his hat, held it on his knees. His blond hair was slicked down, parted in the middle.

"How do you like working for me ?" I asked, pushing the bottle of Scotch and a glass towards him.

"I like it fine, Mr. Cain," he said nervously; shook his head at the bottle. "No, thank you. I don't use it."

"You mean you don't drink?"

"Not in my profession," he returned seriously. "Alcohol dulls one's powers of observation."

I nodded gravely. "So it does," I said. "How long have you been in this racket ?"

"You mean how long have I been a private investigator?" he asked, blushing. "Well, not long." He looked at me earnestly. "As a matter of fact, Mr. Cain, I—this is my first big job."

"Well, you're doing fine," I said. "It doesn't worry you to work for me ?" I grinned to soften the blow, added, "I'm wanted for three murders."

He stared at his hat, twisted it, put it on the table. "My view of the matter, Mr. Cain, is you've been unjustly accused by an unscrupulous person," he said.

I blinked. "You really think that?" I said, glancing at Tim whose

mouth had fallen open.

"Oh yes," Clairbold said. "I've studied the facts very closely. You see, i have my reputation to consider. It wouldn't do for me to work for anyone guilty of murder. I have satisfied myself that you are an innocent party to the murders."

"Pity there aren't more like you around," I said. "Well, you have something to tell me, haven't you?"

"Yes. I have a full report here," he said, drawing a sheaf of papers from his pocket.

I hurriedly waved them away. "Just tell me," I said. "Reading isn't my strong suit."

He squared his shoulders and fixing his eyes on the wall behind my head, he said, "At ninethirty p.m. this evening, I received instructions from Mr. Davis to shadow Juan Gomez, a jai alai player, suspected of running Cuban nationals between this coast and Havana."

I ran my fingers through my hair, looked at Tim, shook my head.

Clairbold went straight on. "I took up a convenient position where I could observe Gomez without being seen. He was playing on the jai alai court at the time. At the end of the game, I waited in my car at the players' entrance. Gomez eventually appeared with a red-headed woman I identified as Lois Spence. They drove away in a Cadillac." He paused to look at his report.

"Never mind the licence number," I said, guessing what he was looking for. "Where did they go?"

He put his report away regretfully. "They took the coast road, and I had no difficulty in following them. The traffic was heavy and I kept two cars behind them. Three miles beyond Dayden Beach there's a branch road that goes down to the sea. They took this road, and I thought it unwise to follow. My headlights would have revealed my presence. I left my car and followed on foot. At the end of the road I found the Cadillac had been parked, and I observed Gomez and Miss Spence walking along the beach in an easterly direction. There was no cover, and it was impossible to go after them without being seen. Fortunately, they did not go far, and I was able to watch them from behind the Cadillac. They waited for several minutes, then a boat, out at sea, began signalling. Gomez returned the signals with a flash-light, and the boat came in. She was a thirty-footer, painted dark green. She

wasn't equipped with outriggers and had no mast. One of the windshields on the pilot house was broken." He cleared his throat, holding his hand before his mouth. "I then observed a concrete ramp, cleverly concealed in the sand, had been built out to sea, allowing the boat to come practically up to the beach. The boat tied up to the ramp. Gomez and Miss Spence went aboard." He paused here, blushed slightly. "My instructions were to find out where the boat was going to. From where I was it was impossible to hear anything. I decided to crawl to the boat, although the risk of detection was considerable. However, I succeeded."

I stared at him, imagining him crawling over the white moonlit sand towards a bunch of cutthroats who'd've rubbed him out without a thought. My estimation of him went up sharply.

"That was a nervy thing to have done," I said, and meant it.

The blush turned to a deep scarlet. "Well, I don't know," he said, rubbing his cheek with his hand. "You see, I've had a thorough training." He hesitated, then blurted out: "Although the Ohio School of Detection teaches through the mail, it doesn't leave anything to chance. They impressed on me that the art of stalking was a pretty useful thing to learn. I'd practised it quite a bit in my room."

Tim choked, coughed, looked away. I scowled at him.

"Go on," I said.

"I succeeded in reaching the concrete ramp, and hid behind it," Clairbold continued, as if it was just another daily task set by the Ohio School of Detection. "After a while Gomez and Miss Spence came on deck, and I heard what they said. He told her he would leave Havana at nine o'clock tomorrow night, drop his cargo at Pigeon Key, and come back here. She arranged to meet him, and then she left the boat. She drove away in the Cadillac. After further delay, another car arrived and four men, obviously Cubans, went on board."

"What were you doing all this time?" I asked, staring at him.

"I had dug myself a kind of fox-hole in the sand," he explained, "and buried myself. I kept a newspaper I had with me over my face so I could breathe, see and hear. It was an idea I got from the chapter in my course on watching suspected people in sandy districts." He brooded for a moment, said: "It's a very satisfactory course. I—I recommend it."

I blew out my cheeks. "It certainly thinks of everything," I said.

"The boat pulled away from the ramp and headed for Havana. I gave it time to clear and then I came back here to report," he concluded.

"Well, I'll be damned," I said.

He looked up. "I—I hope you're satisfied, Mr. Cain," he said anxiously.

"I'll say I am," I told him. "Now look, young fellow, you ought to be more careful. This is a tough mob, and you're taking too many risks. You've done a swell job, but I don't want to lose you."

He smiled. "Oh, I can take care of myself, Mr. Cain," he assured me. "I have learned boxing, and I can shoot."

I looked him over and wondered where he had left his muscles. Probably at home, I thought. He certainly hadn't brought them with him. "Did you learn boxing and shooting through the mail too?" I asked gently.

He blushed. "Well, yes. I haven't had a chance yet to try any of it out, but I understand the theory pretty well."

This time I didn't dare look at Tim. I took out my wallet, pushed over two hundred dollar bills, "That's for being a smart guy," I said. "Stick around, and I'll have something more for you before long."

His eyes lit up and he picked up the notes eagerly.

"I'm glad you're satisfied, Mr. Cain," he said. "This means a lot to me " He hesitated, plunged on: "If it's all right with you, I thought I might investigate this—er—house of ill-fame. Of course, I don't like going to such a place, but it's part of my job, isn't it?" He eyed me hopefully, seriously.

"It is," I said gravely.

"Then you think I might investigate there?"

"I think it's a good idea," I said, nodding. "Only be careful some hussie doesn't make a play for you."

He blushed. "I'm not susceptible to women," he said earnestly. "It's part of my training to resist temptation."

I pulled at my nose. "Is there a chapter on that too?" I asked blankly.

"Oh yes," he said. "They go very fully into that subject in a chapter called 'Sex and the Selfcontrolled Man'."

I whistled. "I'd like to read that," I said. "Maybe I'd get something out of it too."

He said he'd be glad to lend it to me any time, got to his feet and prepared to duck out.

"Just a second," I said, pointing to his cocoa-coloured hat "Don't think I'm being critical, but is it wise to wear a lid like that? There's nothing wrong with the hat itself. It's a pretty snappy effort, but if you're following anyone, isn't it a little conspicuous? You can see it a mile off."

He positively beamed.

"That's the idea, Mr. Cain," he said. "This is a special line that goes with the course. Actually, it's a trick hat." He took the cocoa-coloured atrocity off his head, whipped off the band, gave the hat a shake and it turned inside out. He reversed the band. He now had a fawn hat with a red and yellow striped band. "Smart, isn't it?" he said. "You see, it keeps people guessing. I personally think the hat is worth the money I paid for the whole course. It's included in the charge."

When he had gone, Tim said, "For crying out loud!" He reached for the Scotch and gave himself a generous shot. He shoved the bottle over to me. "Here, buck yourself up with this."

I waved the bottle away. "Not for me," I said. "I gotta watch my powers of observation."

4

Early the next morning, Tim and I took a trip to Miami, some seventy miles from Paradise

Palms. We went in Tim's Mercury convertible, and the trip didn't take us more than ninety minutes.

I called in on the Federal Field Office, leaving Tim in the car outside.

The Federal Agent was named Jack Hoskiss. He was a big, beefy guy, with a shock of blueblack hair, a big fleshy face and humorous eyes. He stood up behind his desk, offered a moist hand.

I didn't beat about the bush. "I'm Chester Cain," I said.

He nodded, said he recognized me, and what could he do?

I stared at him. "I'm supposed to have killed three guys," I reminded him. "Don't you want to make anything of it?"

He shook his head. "When Paradise Palms Police Department call us in, we'll do something about it," he said, offering me a cigar. "Right now, it's off our beat."

I eyed him over. "Your job is to hold me anyway," I said.

"Don't make it hard for yourself," he returned, grinning. "You don t have to tell me my job. We have an idea what you're after." He glanced out of the window, smiled to himself. "We might be after the same thing."

I grinned. "That guy Killeano is nobody's love child."

"It beats me why he hasn't yet made a false move," Hoskiss said. "We've been watching him for months, but so far he's been smart. I'd like to get something on him."

"So would I," I said, and slid the five-dollar bill Davis had given me across the desk. "That might interest you."

He looked at it without picking it up, looked at me. raised his eyebrows.

"What's the idea?"

"Look at it. It won't bite."

He picked it up, examined it. Then he sat up, bringing his chair straight with a crash. He was interested all right.

"Where did you get this?" he snapped.

"Found it," I said. "There're a lot floating around Paradise Palms."

"Yeah," he said savagely. He opened a drawer, took out a box and produced a bunch of notes. He compared the one I'd given him, grunted, put it in the box with the others. "They're good, aren't they?" he said grudgingly. "We've been after that gang for months. But up to now we haven't a lead. No idea where it came from?"

"I might make a guess," I said.

He waited, but I didn't enlarge on it.

"Where?" he asked, when he was sure I'd need persuasion.

I drew on the cigar, blew smoke on to the desk. "I have a proposition to discuss with you."

A thin smile played on his lips. "I thought you might have," he said, nodding. "Shoot."

I told him the story from the time I had hit Paradise Palms. I left Mitchell out of it and where Miss Wonderly was, the rest of it I gave him straight.

He sat huddled in his chair, a blank look m his eyes, and listened. When I was through, he whistled soundlessly.

"Why didn't that fool Herrick come to us?" he said bitterly. "We'd've given him all the protection he needed, and helped him clean up. I love these smart guys who hope to surprise us with a completed case."

"He didn't come to you, but I have," I reminded him gently.

He looked me over. "Well, what now?"

"I'm tired of being the fall guy," I said, flicking ash on the floor. "I'm going to bust Paradise Palms wide open." I pointed a ringer at him. "That's why I've come to you."

He raised his eyebrows. "Go on," he said.

"Two things, both of them Federal business: smuggling aliens into the country and counterfeiting."

"Where'll that get you with Killeano?"

I smiled. "That's my end of it. I'm not giving you all the work to do; just part of it."

"Go on."

"Tonight a boat will unload a parcel of Cubans at Pigeon Key. They'll be leaving Havana around nine o'clock. The boat's a thirty-footer, painted dark green, no mast, no outriggers, broken windshield in the pilot house. I'll be glad if you'd take care of it."

"Sure?"

"Sure, I'm sure. It's a hot tip."

"Okay, I'll take care of it."

"Another thing. I want Killeano to get the credit for the tip-off. Davis will handle the publicity. Okay with you?"

He frowned. "What's the idea?"

"Just part of the little plot," I said. "Is it worth your while playing along with me if I turn over the counterfeiting plant and the boys who work it?"

"It might be," he said cautiously. "You seem to know a hell of a lot about this business, Cain. Suppose you open out. And don't think you can use this office to further your own interests, because you can't."

"Now you sound just like a cop," I returned. "Look, I'm giving you a boat full of undesirable Cubans, and I'm going to show you where this dud money comes from. Where's your gratitude?"

He grinned. "Well, okay," he said, "but don't start anything we can't finish."

"I wouldn't do that," I said. "Come to Paradise Palms on Thursday night. Meet me at 46 Waterside at eleven o'clock and come prepared for trouble. If you can arrange to have some of your boys within reach, so much the better, but they are not to show until trouble starts."

He stared. "What's the idea? That joint's a brothel. Why there?"

I winked at him. "Don't you ever relax, brother?" I asked as I made for the door..

5

Six o'clock the following morning, Davis came bursting into my bedroom. I woke with a start, grabbed my gun from under my pillow, saw who it was, sank back.

"That's the way guys meet with accidents," I said crossly, rubbing my eyes. "What time is it?"

"I like that," Davis snorted. "I've been slaving all through the night and come over here to show you how bright I am, and you talk of accidents."

I yawned, lit a cigarette, sat up in bed.

suppress the smuggling racket, and it is all the more to Ed. Killeano's credit that he has taken such prompt action when only being in office a few hours.

In an exclusive interview with the *Morning Star,* Killeano said that he was determined to clean up Paradise Palms once and for all. "Now I have taken over the job of Chief of Police," he said, "I am showing no mercy to the racketeers hiding in our City. I am going to smoke them out. Let them be warned. I appeal to my supporters to return me to Office so that I can complete the task I have already begun. This is only a beginning."

Acting on information from a secret source, the new Chief of Police ordered Coast Guards to seize a mysterious motor-launch operating off Pigeon Key. A desperate battle ensued, and the motor-launch was sunk, but not before some twelve Cuban nationals lost their lives . . . .

There was a lot more in this vein, photographs of the boat half in and half out of the water, of Killeano and the Coast Guards. It was a nice piece of work, and I told Davis so.

"But wait until Killeano sees it," he said, scratching his head vigorously. "When he realizes how he's been committed, he'll have the shock of his life."

"I guess he will," I said, jumping out of bed. "And there isn't a thing he can do about it. This is terrific propaganda for his election campaign. He daren't deny he sold Gomez out: not even to Gomez. And if he did, Gomez wouldn't believe him."

I scrambled into my clothes.

"Where are you going at this ungodly hour?" Davis demanded. "I've never seen such an energetic guy. Me—I'm dead on my feet."

"Hop into bed, then," I said. "After that write-up I wouldn't deny you anything. I have a date with Gomez."

"Yeah?" Davis said, kicking off his shoes "Where do you think you'll find him at this hour?"

"With Lois Spence," I said, making for the door. "If he isn't there, I can always look at the dame. She interests me."

He took off his coat and stretched out on the bed. "She interests me too," he said with a sigh. "But not with that Gomez thug hanging around. He cools my ardour."

I took Tim's Mercury convertible, drove out to Lexington Avenue. The night staff were still on duty, and I walked over to the hall porter's cubby-hole.

"Hello, dad," I said, smiling at the old boy. "Remember me?"

He remembered me all right. There's nothing like a little folding money to impress your personality on anyone.

"Yes, sir, "he said, brightening up. "I remember you very well, sir."

"I thought you would," I said, and looked round to make sure no one was watching us. I produced a fifty-dollar bill, folded it slowly, giving him ample time to see it, then hid it in my hand.

His eyes started out of his head like organ stops

"Gomez with Miss Spence?" I asked casually.

He nodded. There was nothing casual about his nod.

"Both tucked up together with nothing between them but their dreams?" I went on.

"I wouldn't know about their dreams, sir," he said, shaking his head. "I don't think I should want to know about them. Hut they're up there all right."

"That's fine. I'd like to drop in and see them. Kind of surprise them," I said, eyeing him "Would there be a pass-key to their room within reach?"

He stiffened. "I couldn't do that, sir," he said, shocked. "I'd lose my job."

I looked at the row of keys hanging on hooks behind him.

"Now I wonder which it would be," I said. "I'd pay fifty bucks for that information, providing you took a short walk after you've told me."

He struggled with his finer feelings, but the fifty bucks made short work of them.

He turned, lifted a key from a hook, put it down on the counter.

"I'm sorry, sir," he said. "I couldn't do it. I have my job to consider."

I slid him the fifty bucks.

"Okay, but you'd better stick to this," I told him. "If you and I work together much longer, you'll be buying your own apartment block."

He snapped up the note, eased his collar, came out of his office.

"If you'll pardon me," he said, "I have to check on the mail deliveries." He hurried across the lobby without looking back.

It didn't take me longer than it'd take you to blink to pick up the pass-key. I walked over to the elevator, rode up to the fourth floor.

Apartment 466 was silent and in semi-darkness. I pulled my .38, held it in my fist. I had no intention of being jumped by Gomez.

I crossed the sitting-room, wandered into the bedroom.

Gomez and Lois Spence were in bed. He lay on his back; she on her side. Neither of them snored. Neither of them looked particularly attractive.

I sat on the edge of the bed, pinched Lois's toes. She muttered in her sleep, turned, flung out a white arm, hit Gomez on his beaky nose. He cursed, threw her arm off, sat up. His eyes took me in, and he snapped awake. He didn't move. The .38 must have looked pretty menacing from where he lay.

"Hello, sportsman," I said, smiling at him. "How did you like your swim?"

He drew in a deep breath, relaxed back on his pillow. His eyes had that ferocious glare reserved for caged tigers, otherwise he kept surprisingly calm.

"You'll do this once too often, Cain," he said, not moving his lips. "What's the idea?"

"No idea," I said. "I blew in because I was curious to know how you liked your little dip last night."

He studied me for a long moment. "I didn't like it," he said, at last.

"Something told me you wouldn't," I said, grinning. "I must be getting clairvoyant. Well, brother, what are you going to do about it?" Without taking my eyes off him, I pulled out the copy of the Morni*ng Star a*nd handed it to him. "Take a gander at that. Our Ed. has cut himself a nice slice of publicity at your expense, hasn't he?"

One look at the headlines brought Gomez up on his elbow. He was

wearing mauve and white pyjamas. They didn't suit his sallow complexion. What with one thing and another, he looked like hell. I bet he felt that way too.

His sudden move uncovered Lois. She didn't seem to have anything on. She grabbed the sheet back, muttered under her breath, turned over.

Not wishing her to miss the fun, I pinched her toes again.

"Cut that out!" she snapped angrily, opened her eyes. She looked at me, stiffened, clutched Gomez. He threw her off, and went on reading the newspaper.

"Hi, Tutz," I said, smiling at her. "Don't froth up your cold cream. Me and Juan are in conference."

She sat up, remembered there were gentlemen present, dived under the bedclothes again.

"What the hell goes on?" she demanded in a voice thick with rage and fright.

"Shut up," Gomez snarled, and went on reading.

"Chivalry in the twentieth century," I said sadly. "Never mind. Relax, beautiful, and wait until the great man has read his paper."

Lois lay back regarding Gomez with glittering, furious eyes.

He got through reading the newspaper, slung it down.

"The rat I" he said, clenching his fists, then remembering I was still with him, went on, "What do you want?"

"Ed. and I don't get along either," I said. "I thought you might feel like doing something about it."

He stared at me for a moment, then lay back. "Such as what?"

"Are you crazy?" Lois demanded furiously. "Why do you let this heel sit on our bed like this? Hit him! Do something!"

Gomez, snarling, slapped her face, got out of bed. "Come into the other room where we can talk," he said. "Women drive me nuts."

I looked at the telephone by the bed, shook my head. "This blue-eyed twist might get ideas," I said. "I'll keep you both where I can watch

you."

Gomez jerked the extension plug from the wall, picked up the telephone and walked across the room.

"I want to talk," he said. "She wants to fight. We'll get nowhere if she's in on the conversation."

"I'll make you pay for this!" Lois stormed. "You can't talk to me like this, you—you gigolo!"

He stepped to the bed.

"Shut up!" he snarled.

"Well, come on," I said impatiently. "If you want to talk, let's talk."

He glared at Lois for a moment, then joined me at the door. Lois started warming up the room with some fancy cursing, but we shut the door and left her to it.

Gomez sat down in an easy chair in the outer room. He ran his fingers through his long oily hair, eyed me the way a snake eyes its first meal after hibernation, said, "Just where do you figure in all this?"

"Killeano's coming after you, buddy," I said, lighting a cigarette. "He knows the only way he can get re-elected is to show the electors that he can handle boys like you. Flaggerty getting knocked off was a break for him. It's given him a chance to show his power. He's sold you out. He'll sell all the other bright boys out too. But you can stop him, if you want to."

"I can stop him all right," Gomez said, clenching his fists. "And I don't want any help or suggestions from you."

"You boys always work the same way," I said, shrugging. "You figure you'll lay for Ed., and fill him full of hot metal. But you won't get near him. He knows you'll come gunning for him, and he'll take precautions. I bet you don't set eyes on him until after the election; then it'll be too late."

Gomez chewed his under-lip, frowning.

"Well, what's your idea, then?"

"An easy way to fix Killeano would be to call at 46 Waterside between eleven-thirty and twelve tonight," I said. "Maybe you didn't

know Ed. relaxed in that joint. He has a private room

in the basement, and his mob goes with him. I don't suppose they'll worry you much, will they?"

He brooded, then stood up. "If that's all you can suggest," he said, "you can beat it. And the next time you snoop into this apartment without being invited, you'll be carried out feet first."

"I'm scared," I said, went to the door, opened it, paused. "If you did find Killeano in that cathouse, it'd look good in the press, wouldn't it? Jed Davis would print all the dirt you gave him so long as you gave him proof. I can't see Ed. being re-elected if that kind of news broke on the morning of the election, can you?"

"Get out," he said.

I went.

6

On the outskirts of Paradise Palms a few tumbled-down huts, side by side, sprawled into the darkness. Further along, standing alone, was the only building of importance.

Over its arched doorway, a sign flickered against the night sky. Forty-six.

I had parked the Mercury convertible in a vacant lot some way back, and I approached the building cautiously, keeping in the shadows. Through the open doorway I could hear dance music. The shuttered windows revealed chinks of light.

A man moved out of the shadows, came towards me. I stopped, waited, my liand on my gun butt.

It was Hoskiss.

"Hi, G-man," I said. "Seen this morning's Morni*ng Star?"*

"Oh, it's you," he said, peering at me. "Yeah, I saw it all light. I bet Killeano's doing a little thinking."

"I bet you are too," I said. "All ready for some relaxation?"

"I'm ready to go in," he said, eyeing the building dubiously. "But I'd like to know what's cooking."

"You will," I said, "only don't rush me. How many boys did you bring?"

"Six. That enough?"

"I hope so. Tell 'em to keep out of sight. We may not need them, but if we do, they'll have plenty on their hand. While they're waiting they can make themselves useful. I want the telephone in this joint cut off. Can they fix the outside lines?"

"I guess so," he said. "What's the idea?"

"I don't want anyone to tip the cops if trouble starts. We'll have enough on our hands without a load of corrupt Law busting in on us."

"I hope you know what you're doing," Hoskiss said. He sounded

worried.

"After the way I handed you those Cubans I think you might exercise a little faith," I said.

"You'd make a swell salesman," Hoskiss said, resigned. "I'll tell them."

I waited. After a while he came back.

"They'll fix it," he said. "Do we go in?"

"We go in," I said. "You got a gun?"

"Yeah," he returned. "I hope you have a permit."

I grinned, walked to the open door, went in.

Inside, under dim lights, was a bar and a dance floor. In a corner, on a yellow and red carpet, an orchestra of four played: a pianist with kinky hair, a sallow-faced fiddler, a nigger drummer and a blond saxophonist. Behind the bar stood a Cuban.

Several couples moved listlessly around the dance floor. The men looked the type you'd expect to find in a joint like this; the girls danced in their underwear. Each had on a brassiere, silk panties, silk stockings and high-heeled slippers. There was a line of flesh on each girl from breast to hip and from one-third down their thighs to their knees. Some of the girls were quite pretty.

The air in the room was torrid, heavy, humid; a combination of human sweat, dime-a-squirt perfume, gin breath. Paper streamers hung from the ceiling like Spanish moss.

We handed our hats to a Chinese boy, and paused to get our bearings.

I glanced at my wrist-watch. It was ten minutes past eleven.

"For the next twenty minutes, you can relax. At eleven-thirty we start work."

"Look at those dames," Hoskiss said, gaping. "So this is what the vice-squad calls work. Say, I might even enjoy myself." He eyed a tall blonde in sheer black silk underwear, who was leaning against the bar, a bored expression on her face. "I don't suppose I can come to much harm in twenty minutes. Let's buy a drink."

"That's the worst of bringing a repressed type like you to a joint like

this," I said, grinning. "You're likely to make a meal of it."

"I'm not blasé," *he said*, heading for the bar.

The blonde watched us come. Her wide, painted mouth smiled. She had good teeth, but when I was close to her, I noticed she had pimples on her back.

"Hello, honey," she said to Hoskiss as he sailed up.

"Hello yourself, juicy fruit," he said, draping himself over the bar. "How about rinsing our tonsils together?" He winked at me. "Blondes go for me. It's my powerful personality."

"You want to be careful with this guy," I said to the blonde. "He eats grape-nuts for breakfast every day. You'd be surprised what it does to him."

The blonde was a little pop-eyed. I guess she thought we were drunk.

The Cuban wiped the counter mechanically, asked us what we would have.

"Let's start a famine in whisky," Hoskiss said. "Three triple whiskies, and keep your thumb out of mine."

The blonde continued to eye us. She couldn't make up her mind which of us to concentrate on.

"Well, sugar plum," Hoskiss said, "that's a nice face and body you're wearing, but I'd hate to share you with anyone. Isn't there some frill who'd take care of my boy friend so we can be alone together?"

"Isn't he big enough to find his own frill?" she asked in a drawling voice. "The joint's lousy with girls."

"There you are," Hoskiss said to me. "Don't horn in on my discovery. Take a look around. Peach blossom says the girls' joints are lousy."

I gaped at him. He was certainly relaxing.

The Cuban shoved the whiskies at us, asked twice their worth.

Hoskiss waved to me.

"This is your party," he said. He nodded to the Cuban. "My friend will pay. That's the only reason why I go around with him."

I slid five bucks to the Cuban. The blonde leaned against me. I smiled. The five spot had decided for her who she was going to be nice to. Hoskiss regarded her sadly.

"You leaning against the wrong man, or did you know?" he said.

"Go bowl a hoop," she said.

He looked quite cut-up.

"And I thought you cared for me for myself," he said, shaking his head at her.

She looked at me. "Tell him to go bowl a hoop," she said. "We don't want him in our party, do we?"

"The lady wants you to bowl a hoop," I said to Hoskiss. "Can you oblige her?"

He finished his whisky, sighed.

"Not immediately," he said, "but don't let that interfere with your fun. She isn't the only blonde who's dipped her head in peroxide. I see a red-head steering my way."

A red-haired girl came up. She was a trifle plump and her face was heavily powdered and rouged. She had on yellow silk panties.

"Want any help?" she asked the blonde. "Take this cram off our hands," the blonde said, waving languidly at Hoskiss. "He eats grape-nuts and hasn't any dough."

The red-head sniffed. "Haven't you really any dough, darling?" she asked Hoskiss.

"You bet," he said. "But I only spend it on red-heads. You've arrived at the crucial moment. Have a drink?" The blonde said to me, "Want to dance?" "Go on and dance," Hoskiss said. "I have my new-found friend to keep me warm."

I sank my whisky, took the blonde on to the floor. My right hand rested on a bulge of warm flesh above her hip. She turned out to be a good dancer, once I got it into her head that I wanted to dance and not wrestle.

After we'd completed a couple of circuits of the floor, I said, "Who runs this joint?"

Under their heavy coating of blue-black mascara her eyes were surprised.

"What's it to you?"

"Look, girlie," I said patiently. "Never mind the cross-talk. I asked who ran this joint. Do you have to make a mystery of it?"

"I guess not," she said. Her eyes went glassy, blank. I decided she didn't find me particularly interesting. "Madam runs it. Is that what you want to know?"

"Madam who?"

She sighed. "Durelli. Satisfied?"

"I don't need to take anything from you," I said gently. "If you can't work up a little enthusiasm, I'll ditch you."

Her eyes flashed, but she managed to control her temper. "Don't get sore, honey," she said. "I want you to have a good tune."

"That makes two of us," I said, manoeuvring her so we passed close to Hoskiss. He eyed us over, said in a loud voice to the redhead: "Extraordinary types you get in here. That fellow would look more at home in a cage." He seemed to be enjoying himself; the red-head too.

"Let's go upstairs," the blonde said, suddenly, impatiently. "It's too hot to dance."

"Sure," I said, and we danced over to the door.

I caught Hoskiss's eye. He looked reproachful.

I winked, waved and followed the blonde out of the room. She ran up a steep flight of stairs, along a passage.

I followed her into a small room furnished with a divan, a cupboard and a carpet.

She stood by the divan, eyed me expectantly.

"You're not going to be mean, are you, honey?" she said.

I reached inside my pocket, produced three five-dollar bills, dangled them before her.

Her eyes lit up and she smiled. The bored, resigned expression

vanished.

"Run along and tell Madam Durelli I want to see her," I said.

She stared. "What's the idea?" she demanded, her voice hardening. "Don't you like me or something?"

"Can't you earn yourself a little dough without sounding off? I'm offering it you the easy way. Take this and get Madam. Go on, beat it."

She snatched the money, slipped it into the top of her stocking, went to the door.

"I thought you were a queer fish the moment I saw you," she said. "Stick around. I'll get her."

I sat on the edge of the divan, lit a cigarette, waited.

Minutes dragged by, then I heard a step outside. The door opened and a big. middle-aged woman came in Her lean face was hard, her eyes jet-beads, and her blonde frizzy hair brittle through constant bleaching. She closed the door, leaned against it, raked me with her eyes.

"What's on your mind?" she asked. Her voice was harsh and flat.

I glanced at my wrist-watch. It was twenty-five minutes past eleven.

"Last night," I said, "the new Chief of Police knocked off a boat belonging to Juan Gomez. Maybe you read about it in the Morni*ng Start"*

An alert, suspicious expression jumped into her eyes.

"Who are you?" she demanded.

"Never mind who I am," I said. "I'm tipping you off. That makes me your pal. How do you like me as a pal?" She continued to stare at me. "Keep talking," she said.

"You look smart," I said, flicking ash on the worn carpet. "I don't have to draw you a map. Gomez is mad because Killeano knocked off his boat. He's on his way out here to start trouble."

She stiffened. "How do you know?"

"I got a fleet of midgets who keep me informed about such things," I said.

"I think I'll get someone to talk to you," she said, a snap in her voice. She turned to the door.

I reached out, grabbed her wrist, jerked her round. Her flesh felt soft, puffy. I didn't fancy touching her.

"No, you won't," I said. "I'm dealing with you. If you can't take a friendly tip, then the hell with it. You haven't much time. Gomez will be here any moment now. You'd better get rid of your clients and the girls. He's bringing his mob."

She studied me for a moment. "Wait," she said, went out.

I sneaked to the door, listened, then stepped into the passage.

She was disappearing into a room at the end of the passage as I came out. I went after her, peered into a well-furnished office. She was trying to get some action from the telephone. It didn't take her long to realize it wasn't working. Her face gave her away. She was scared.

"Get organized," I said from the door, "and make it snappy."

She pushed past me, almost ran from the room.

I heard her on the stairs, followed her. I was only three steps behind her when she reached a door to the right of the foot of the stairs.

She turned.

"Get out of here," she snarled, breathing hard. "Go in there and amuse yourself; scram, but don't follow me around."

I nodded.

"Just so long as you know what to do," I said, turned and walked back to the main hall. As I passed the open front door, I paused.

Two big closed cars were drawing up by the tumbledown huts. Men spilled from them.

I thought I might as well launch the balloon. I drew my gun and fired three times above the heads of the running men. Then I slammed the front door, shot home the bolts, put my gun back in its holster, and walked into the dance hall.

7

Hoskiss and I sat under the bar counter. We had the redheaded girl with us, but we had kicked the Cuban out, considering him poor company.

Hoskiss was telling the red-head about his adventures in the Army. He made them sound very exciting and dangerous. The red-head didn't seem to be listening. She sat huddled up, her hands clasping her knees, a look of strained terror on her face.

Bullets sang through the air; gunfire crackled.

"It reminds me of the time when I was cut off from the rest of the boys after crossing the Rhine," Hoskiss said reminiscently. "I was bottled up in a fox-hole, and the Jerries started to mortar my position. I didn't have any whisky to fortify me, and I was scared."

"Not you," I said. "Not a big guy like you."

He anchored his mouth to a bottle of Scotch, took a Ions pull.

"You don't have to be sarcastic," he said. "I bet there was time when you were scared too."

I took the bottle away from him, gave myself a stiff shot.

Someone quite close started firing an automatic rifle. Tb noise was considerable. The redhead screamed, flung her round Hoskiss's neck, clung to him.

"I'm glad you invited me to this party," he said to me. "The baby has lost her repressions. She's almost a woman again." He held the red-head tightly, winked at me over her head.

"I hope this counter is bullet proof," I said, pressing the partition with my fingers. It seemed solid enough.

"So long as they can't see me, I feel safe," Hoskiss said "Don't undermine my confidence."

"I want to go home," the red-head wailed. They were the first words she had uttered since the shooting had begun.

"I should wait if I were you, baby," Hoskiss said kindly. "The air

outside is awfully unhealthy. I'd hate to see holes those pretty pants of yours. Besides, what should I do without you?"

I worked my way to the end of the counter, cautiously peer round. The dance floor was deserted. I could make out the four members of the band sheltering under the piano. The nigger's face was grey; his eyes were closed; he held his drum sticks tightly clenched in his right hand. He was more expose than the other three, and he kept trying to wriggle further under cover, but they wouldn't let him.

Two of the girls had overturned a table and were crouching behind it. I could see their silk clad legs, no more. Over the other side of the room, a man and girl sat against the wall. The girl looked terrified. The man was smoking. His red, mottled face was slack. He kept saying in a loud voice, "Aw, the hell with it."

All the other men and girls had gone. They were probably hiding in the rooms at the back of the building.

Desultory gunfire kept the night alive. Apart from the automatic rifle, there seemed no organized opposition from within.

"These lads are slow off the mark," I said to Hoskiss.

"Well, we have lots of time," he returned, giving himself another drink. "Do you expect me to join in or something?"

"Not just yet," I said. 'You better case off on the Scotch. When you do go into action, you'll need calm and courage."

"I'm always calm," he returned, grinning, "and I'm stocking up in courage."

I wanted to locate the automatic rifle. It kept banging off near by, but from where I lay, I couldn't see who was using it. I lay flat, wriggled further out, until my head and shoulders were clear of the protecting counter.

"That's how guys won the Purple Heart," Hoskiss said to the red-head. "It's also a good way to qualify for a funeral."

I looked around, spotted the sportsman with the rifle. He was kneeling against the front of the counter, and every so often he'd fire blindly at the shuttered windows. He was middle-aged, going bald. Thick glasses sat uneasily on his short fat nose.

"How are you making out, bud?" I asked him. "Think you're hitting

anyone?"

He jumped round with a snarl of fright, swung the gun in my direction. I didn't wait, but pulled back so fast the red-head squealed with terror.

"Someone say 'Boo!' to you?" Hoskiss asked, grinning.

I sat up, wiped my face, shook my head.

"There's a middle-aged sportsman out there on his own," I explained. "He's banging away without even sighting. Maybe I'd better go out and get things organized. This is no way to wage war."

"Don't be so bloodthirsty," Hoskiss said, frowning. "Me and the girl friend find it exciting, don't we, Tutz?"

The red-head said it was too exciting. The language in which she expressed this opinion startled us.

"I can't imagine where you girls pick up such talk," Hoskiss said, pained. "When I was your age——"

The red-head told him to go boil his head, and she added a couple of other suggestions in case the first one didn't appeal to him.

It was funny to see a tough guy like Hoskiss turn pink.

Without warning a machine-gun began firing. Bullets smashed through the wooden shutters. A row of bottles above our heads flew into pieces. Liquor and glass showered down on us. The red-head was soused with gin. Whisky poured over Hoskiss's trouser ends. A piece of flying glass cut my cheek, but I kept dry.

"She'll taste interesting now if you kiss her," I said to Hoskiss.

"I can't stomach gin," he said, regarding the girl crossly. "Why couldn't it've been Scotch?"

"Well, you can always chew your trousers. You might start a new craze."

The red-head had collapsed into Hoskiss's arms, wailing with fright. He shoved her off.

"I don't love you any more. You smell like hell."

The sportsman with the automatic rifle began blazing away again. I

peeped out.

The nigger drummer rolled his eyes at me. The two pairs of silk clad legs behind the table were still as death. The red-faced man over the other side of the room was glaring angrily at the torn shutters. He suddenly got to his feet, lurched across the room. He was very drunk. As he reached the shutters, the machine-gun started up. He was swept backwards by the hail of bullets. Everyone in the room heard the slugs socking into his body. He landed up on his back, blood ran out of him on to the polished dance floor.

"Real bullets," I said, wriggling back under cover. "They've just killed a drunk."

"Shocking waste of good liquor," Hoskiss said, unmoved. He joined me at the end of the counter, looked at the dead man, shook his head. "I feel like letting off my gun now. Childish, isn't it?"

The door to the dance hall suddenly pushed open and three men came in on their hands and knees. They all carried automatic rifles, all looked business-like.

"Shock troops," Hoskiss said, beaming. "Now something ought to happen."

I pulled back as I spotted Don Speratza in the doorway. He didn't come into the room, but directed the men to take up positions by the window. He was careful not to expose himself more than necessary. I was glad to see him.

The men crawled across the dance floor, crept to the windows and began pouring lead into the night. A sudden yell outside proved they knew their job.

"We might take a little walk before long," I said. "I'm getting tired of staying one place."

"Ready when you are," Hoskiss said, pulling a Mauser pistol from his hip pocket. He thumbed down the safety catch.

The red-head squeaked, "Don't leave me," grabbed at him. He threw her arms off impatiently.

"Lay off," he said roughly. "I got work to do now, Tate."

Speratza had vanished. I could hear shooting going on at the back of the building. There were yells. It sounded like a break-in.

"Think your boys will take any action?" I whispered.

"They're on the job now," Hoskiss said, cocking an ear. "I recognize the sound of a Mauser any place. Hark."

We could hear a lot of shooting going on outside.

"That's fine," I said. "In your official capacity I guess you wouldn't hesitate to shoot if anyone looked troublesome?"

"You bet I'd shoot," he said.

"In that case, brother, you'd better go first. I'll cover your rear."

"If you want to lead, go ahead," he said hastily. "I'll take full responsibility for any deaths you cause."

Put like that I hadn't the heart to refuse. I dived for the door, passed into the main hall.

A dim shape standing by the front door twisted round, fired. I felt the wind from the slug fan my face. I shot the dim shape through the head.

"You see how it is," I said apologetically to Hoskiss. "People just naturally shoot at me."

"Don't let it grieve you," Hoskiss said, peering round the hall. "You go ahead. You're faster with a gun than I am. I want to come out of this alive."

There didn't seem any further opposition in the hall. I made for the door at the foot of the stairs.

"This way, pal," I said. "Be ready for action."

I pushed open the door, faced a flight of stairs leading down into a dimly lit basement.

I walked down the stairs, making no more noise than a breath of wind. Hoskiss kept at my heels.

We reached the bottom of the stairs, moved along a passage. I pointed to a thick electric cable running along the wall near the ceiling. Hoskiss nodded, grinned.

At the end of the passage was a door. I paused outside, listened. I couldn't hear anything.

"Shall we go in?" I whispered in Hoskiss's ear.

"I suppose so," he said. "G-men always go in."

I turned the handle, pushed.

The room was big; elaborately equipped with printing presses. Green shaded lights illuminated the stacks of banknotes piled neatly on benches.

A dead man lay on the floor near the printing press. He had been shot. A small blue-red hole showed in the exact centre of his forehead.

Ed. Killeano knelt on the floor against the far wall. His fat face was yellow and glistening with fear. His pudgy hands were shoulder high, and his eyes started from his head like long stalked toadstools. Clairbold, the intrepid private investigator, complete with his cocoacoloured trick hat, stood over him, a Colt .45 in his small hand.

"Take him away," Killeano screamed at us as we came in. "Make him put that gun down."

Hoskiss and I walked over.

"Hello, Fatso," I said. "Don't you like our young friend?" I touched Clairbold on his shoulder. "What are you doing here, bright eyes?"

"Call him off!" Killeano shrieked. "Get that gun away!"

Clairbold lowered the gun, cleared his throat apologetically. "I'm glad you've come, Mr. Cain," he said. "I was wondering what I should do with this—er—man."

Hoskiss ran his fingers through his hair. "Who's this guy?" he asked blankly.

"The greatest private dick since Philo Vance," I said.

Killeano made a sudden dive across the desk, reached for a sheet of paper. Hoskiss flung him back.

"Take it easy," he said. "Park your truss until I can get around to you."

Killeano snarled at him, wrung his hands.

Clairbold picked up the sheet of paper, blushed, shuffled his feet.

"I have a statement here," he said, handing me the paper. "It completely clears you, Mr. Cain. This man admits that Bat Thompson killed Herrick, Giles and Brodey, acting on his orders. They knew about the forgery plant. Killeano also admits he is responsible for issuing forged currency. I think you'll find it in order."

Dazed, I read the statement. It was a beautifully worded confession. Silently I handed it to Hoskiss who read it, said, "For God's sake!"

"I deny every word of it," Killeano babbled. "He was going to shoot me!"

"How did you persuade him to write this?" I asked Clairbold.

He fingered his tie nervously.

"I really don't understand it myself, Mr. Cain," he said, puzzled. "I think perhaps he was

frightened my gun wasn't safe." He shook his head. "He could be right because it went off unexpectedly when that man rushed in." He waved his hand at the body by the printing plant. "Killeano thought I might shoot him accidentally. He was quite mistaken, of course, but when I suggested he might care to make a statement he seemed most anxious to do so."

I looked at Hoskiss, who burst out laughing.

"Look," I said to Clairbold, "you don't kid me. You're not half as dumb as you act. Son, you have a great future before you."

He blushed. "Well, Mr. Cain, it's nice of you to say so. I've been trained to appear rather simple. The Ohio School of Detection has taught me that criminals underrate people who act dumb."

I dug Hoskiss in the ribs. "You might get somewhere if you took that course," I said. "Look what it's done for this lad." Then I nodded at Killeano. "Your prisoner, buddy, and it's our job to get him out of here."

"Forget it," Speratza snarled from the door. "Stick up your hands or I'll blast the lot of you."

We turned.

Speratza was covering us from the door with a Thompson. His face was white, his eyes vicious.

I had laid my .38 on the desk as I read Killeano's statement. I calculated the distance, decided it was too far.

Killeano made another rush, tried to grab the statement, but Hoskiss flung him off.

A gun exploded at my side. Speratza dropped the Thompson, swayed. A blue-red hole appeared in the centre of his forehead. He crashed to the floor.

"I don't believe this gun is safe," Clairbold muttered, staring at the smoking Colt, but there was a satisfied gleam in his eyes that told me he was kidding.

I fell into Hoskiss's arms.

"For the love of Mike," I babbled hysterically, "he learned to shoot like that through the mail."

8

On the face of it, it looked as if the show was over. I left the tidying up to Hoskiss. I wish now I had done it myself because they let Bat Thompson slide through their fingers. They threw a drag-net around Paradise Palms, but when they hauled it in, everyone who mattered was in it except Bat.

It worried me at first, but after thinking it over I decided that Bat by himself wasn't a danger. He hadn't the brains to think up trouble, and he was as near moronic as made no difference. But I would have liked to have seen him behind bars. The Feds were pretty sure that he had got away. It spoilt their case, since he was the guy who had bumped off Herrick, Giles and Brodey.

Killeano got twenty-five years. Speratza and Flaggerty were dead. Juan Gomez had been killed by one of the Federal officers in the fight outside 46 Waterside.

Once I was sure that Bat wasn't in town, I asked Tim to fetch Miss Wonderly from Key West.

We were now in Palm Beach Hotel, trying to decide our future.

I sat on the balcony and looked at the green ocean. Only this time I didn't have any presentiment of trouble. She sat on the balustrade.

"All right," I said, after I had heard her argument. "I'll get a job. I'll go respectable if that's what you really want."

Her eyes were full of questions.

"But I want you to be happy too," she said. "If you don't think you could settle down . . ."

"I can try, can't I ?" I said. "The thing to do is for you and me to get married. Then I'll have to settle down."

And that's how we fixed it.

Four days later we were married. Hetty, Tim, Jed Davis, Clairbold (the boy wonder), and Hoskiss turned up at the wedding. It was quite an affair.

We decided to spend our honeymoon at Paradise Palms because the

others didn't want us to go elsewhere. They were pretty good to us, but at the end of the week I decided, if I was going to get a job, I'd better start looking for one. We packed our bags and arranged air passage to New York.

On our last night at Paradise Palms we threw a party that the staff of the hotel still talk about. Hoskiss brought with him six of his hard-drinking G-men. He announced at the beginning of dinner that Clairbold had entered the Federal Service. Clairbold finished up under the table. I guess he was getting beyond his Ohio School of Detection course by now.

After our guests had gone, we went up to our bedroom. It was around two o'clock in the morning. We were undressing in the bedroom when the telephone rang.

I told Clair—she wasn't Miss Wonderly any more—I'd answer it.

I went into the sitting-room, took off the receiver.

The line crackled, hummed. A woman's voice said, "Chester Cain?"

I said it was, wondering where I had heard the voice before.

"This is Lois Spence," the woman said.

"Hello," I said, wondering what she wanted. I had forgotten about her.

There was a lot of noise on the line. It crackled, popped and buzzed.

"Listen, you heel," she said, her voice indistinct, far away. "You tricked Juan, and it was through you he was killed. Don't think you're going to get away with it. I pay off old debts, so does Bat. Remember him? He's right by my side. We're coming after you, Cain. We'll find you wherever you are. You and your floozie, and we'll fix you both."

The line went dead. I replaced the receiver, frowned. Spiders' legs ran down my neck.

"Who was it?" Clair called.

"A wrong number," I said, and went back to the bedroom.

Chapter Six
PAY OFF

1

A PACKARD sedan swished to a standstill before one of the air towers. I glanced through the office window to satisfy myself that Bones, the negro help, was on the job. He was there all right. I watched him fussing around the car, gave him full marks for his enthusiasm, returned to work.

I still got a big bang out of seeing a customer arrive although I had now been running the service station for three months. It was a good buy, and after spending money on it, I had already doubled the business the previous owner had got out of it.

Clair had been startled when I had told her I intended to buy a service station. She thought I was planning to get a job with a big company in New York. So I was, but after that 'phone call from Lois Spence I had changed my mind.

I guessed Lois had found out that I had reservations for an air passage to New York, and would follow me there. I decided to duck out of sight. If I had been on my own I'd have waited for them, but Clair complicated things. I couldn't be with her every minute of the day, and they wouldn't have had much difficulty in handling her if they ever caught up with her.

So I cancelled the air passage, told Clair I wanted to go into the motor business, and pulled out of Paradise Palms in the Buick for a long haul to California.

I found what I was looking for on the Carmel-San Simeon Highway, within easy reach of San Francisco and Los Angeles. It was a small, bright well-kept station, and the owner was only giving up through ill-health.

It had four pumps, ten thousand gallons of storage, oil lube tanks, two air and water towers, and a good bit of waste land for extra buildings. The thing that really decided us was the house that went with the business. It was only a few yards from the service station, and it had a nice little garden. The house itself was cute, and Clair fell for it the moment she saw it. I fell for it too because she would be close to me all the time, and until I was sure we had lost Lois and Bat that was the way I wanted it.

I began to make alterations to the service station as soon as we

moved in. I had it painted red and white. Even the pavements of the driveways were divided into red and white squares. I had a big sign hoisted on the roof which read: THE SQUARE SERVICE STATION.

Clair nearly died laughing when she saw the sign, but I knew it was the kind of thing that pulled in suckers.

I added two more air and water towers. Mechanics put in a new type of hydraulic hoist and a complete high-pressure greasing outfit. Near the rest-room building, startling under its new coat of paint and shining inside with added luxuries, was erected a steel shed to house car-washing and polishing equipment.

I hired Bones and a couple of youths to help, and business went ahead with a bang.

One of the youths, Bradley, was a pretty smart mechanic, and I knew most things about the inside of a car. We didn't reckon to take on any big repair jobs, but we could handle the day-today adjustments that came in; but once we did handle three cars that got involved in a smash.

All day long cars kept coming in, and I was on the jump from six in the morning to seven at night. I fixed up a night shift as I found I was turning away business by closing down at seven. I got an old man and a youth to handle the night trade, which wasn't heavy, but kept coming, three or four cars an hour.

I had just finished checking the accounts and I found I'd cleared nine hundred dollars after three months' work. I ran over to the house to let Clair know we weren't broke yet.

I found her in the kitchen, a cook-book in her hand, a puzzled expression in her eyes.

She found the job of being a housewife tougher than I found my new job. She had started off with little or no knowledge of how to run a house, how to cook, but she wouldn't hire a help. She said she wanted to learn to be useful, and it was time she knew how to cook anyway. I didn't dissuade her, reckoning that after a while she'd get tired of it and throw in her hand. But she didn't. For the first two or three weeks we ate some pretty awful meals. I have a cast-iron stomach so I didn't complain, and after a while the meals got better; now they were pretty good, and improving all the time.

She kept the house like a new pin, and I finally persuaded her to let

one of the youths do the rough work, but the rest of it she continued to do herself.

Hi, honey," I said, breezing into the kitchen. "I've just audited the books. We're nine hundred

bucks to the good: that's clear profit, and we don't owe a cent."

She turned, laid down the cook-book, laughed at me.

"I believe you're really crazy about your old gas station," she said. "And after all those threats about not settling down."

I put my arm round her. "I've been too busy to realize that this is settling down. I've never worked so hard in my life. I had the idea that when a guy settled down, he parked his fanny, and let moss grow over him. I guess I was wrong."

"Don't say fanny," she reproved. "It's vulgar."

I grinned at her. "Let's run into San Francisco tonight, and paint the town red," I said. "It's time you and I stepped out. We've been working now three months without a break. How about it?"

Her eyes lit up. "Yes, let's do that," she said, throwing her arms round my neck. "Can you get off early?"

"If we leave just before seven it'll be time enough. Going to put on your glad rags?"

"Of course, and so are you. It's time I saw you in something better than those awful old overalls."

The station buzzer sounded. That told me Bones had someone out front whom he couldn't handle.

"A little trouble," I said, kissing Clair. "See how important I am? The moment I turn my back——"

She pushed me out of the kitchen.

"Run away," she said, "or you won't have any lunch."

I beat it back to the station.

There was trouble all right. A big Cadillac had hit the concrete wall of the driveway. Its fender had been pushed in and the bumper was buckled. It was a swell-looking car, and it hurt me to see the damage.

Bones was standing by. His usually smiling face was shiny and dismayed. He rolled his eyes at me as I came up.

"It wasn't my fault, boss," he said hurriedly. "The lady got into the wrong gear."

"Don't tell such bloody lies, you rotten nigger," a shrill, hard voice exploded from inside the car. "You waved me on. I thought I had plenty of room."

I signalled to Bones to scram, then walked up to the car, looked in.

A typical lovely young product of Hollywood sat at the wheel. She was dark, expensively dressed, pretty according to the standard hardness of the Movie colony. She was also very angry, and under her rouge her skin was white as marble.

"See what your blasted nigger's done to my car," she stormed as soon as she saw me. "Fetch the manager. I'm going to raise holy hell about this!"

"Start raising it now," I said quietly. "I'm the owner, manager and office boy all rolled into one. I'm sorry to see such a grand car busted like this."

She eyed me up and down. "So you're sorry, are you? What am I supposed to do? Smile and drive away? Let me tell you that you haven't started to be sorry yet!"

I would have liked to have slapped her, but remembering that customers are always right, I said I'd have the fender fixed for her immediately.

"What?" she snapped. "I wouldn't let you touch it." She drummed on the steering wheel. "I must have been crazy to have turned into a hick joint like this. Well, it'll certainly "be a lesson to me. No more hick joints for me."

I felt my temper rising, so I walked to the front of the car, inspected the damage. It certainly was pretty bad, and it seemed to me she must have rammed the wall with considerable force.

"Just to get the record straight," I said, coming back, "just how did this happen?"

"I was reversing ... I mean I was coming forward—-"

"You were reversing, you mean," I said. "You couldn't have come forward from this angle. But you made a mistake in the gears and your car jumped forward." I glanced inside the car. "If you look, you'll see your gear is still in bottom."

She opened the car door, her eyes flashing.

"Are you suggesting I can't drive a car?" she asked, getting out of the car, facing me.

"It looks that way," I said, sick of her.

Her mouth tightened, and she swung a slap at my face. I picked it off in mid-air, held her wrist, grinned at her. We were close, and I caught the smell of gin on her breath. I looked at her sharply. She was drunk all right. I wondered I hadn't noticed it before.

"What goes on?" a flat voice demanded.

I looked around, saw a State Highway cop frowning at me. I let go of the girl's wrist.

"Arrest that man!" the girl stormed. "He was trying to assault me."

"Bad for business," the cop said, eyeing me over.

"Very," I said.

Clair appeared from nowhere.

I winked at her.

"The lady's charging me with assault," I said, and laughed.

Clair took my arm, said nothing. We looked at the cop. The ball seemed to be in his court.

"Why did you try to hit him?" the cop asked the girl. "I saw you do that."

"Look what he's done to my car," she stormed. "Call this a Service Station! My God! I'll sue this crummy bastard out of business."

The cop eyed her disapprovingly, walked to the Cadillac, looked at it.

"Tsk, tsk." He clicked with his tongue, glanced inside the car, spotted the gear lever, gave me an old-fashioned look. "What have you gotta

say about this, pal?" he asked.

"My man saw what happened," I said. "I just tried to smooth things over." I turned, waved to Bones, who was watching with enormous eyes in the background. "Tell the officer what happended," I said as he shuffled up.

"If you're going to take that lousy nigger's word against mine, I'll have the coat off your back!" the girl stormed.

"Will you?" the cop said, raising his eyebrows. "You and who else? Come on," he went on to Bones, "spill it."

Bones told how the Cadillac had driven into the driveway very fast, and had pulled up dead, narrowly missing the air tower. He had asked the girl to reverse back to the gas pump as she had wanted gas, and she had promptly driven slap into the wall.

"Yeah, I guess that's about how it did happen," the cop said. He eyed the girl over. "What's your name, sister?"

I thought she was going to explode.

"My good man," she said, after a tense pause. "I am Lydia Hamilton, the Goldfield Production star."

I had never heard of her, but then I seldom went to the movies. Bones apparently had, because he sucked his teeth and goggled at her.

"I don't care if you're George Washington's grandmother or even Abe Lincoln's aunt, you're pinched," the cop said. "The charge, if it interests you, is being drunk while in charge of a car. Now come on, we'll all take a trip to the station."

I thought the girl was going to strike the cop; so did he, because he took a quick step back. But she controlled herself, said, "You'll be sorry you started this," walked to the Cadillac.

"Hey, you ain't fit to drive," the cop said. He looked at me. "Take her over to the station, pal. You'll be wanted as a witness, anyway. Better send the dinge over too."

I didn't want to go, but there was nothing else I could do. I told Clair I'd be right back, asked Bradley to keep an eye on the station, and went over to the Cadillac.

"I'm not having that rat drive me," the girl said.

"Look, sister," the cop said in a bored voice, "I'll send for the waggon if you like. You're under arrest, and you can come to the station any way you like, but you'll come."

She hesitated, then got into the Cadillac. She threw the ignition keys at me, hitting me in the face. I picked them off the floor, got in beside her, shifted the gear lever from bottom to neutral, trod on the starter.

She began cursing me as soon as we had driven out into the highway. She kept on without a pause for a mile or so, then I got tired of it, told her to shut up.

"I'm not shutting up, you cheap grease monkey," she said. "I'll ruin you for this. You and your prissy mouth floozie. When I'm through with you, you'll be sorry you were born."

"Someone who doesn't mind touching you ought to apply a hairbrush to your tail," I said.

She gave a squeal of fury, flung herself at me and wrenched the wheel to the right. The car, travelling at forty miles an hour, slewed across the road. I stamped on the foot brake, lugged back the parking brake. The car stopped dead, and she was thrown forward. Her head slammed against the dash-board. She passed out.

The cop had skidded to a standstill. He got off his motorcycle, walked over to me.

"For the love of Mike," he said crossly. "Can't you drive, either?"

I told him what had happened, and be looked at the unconscious girl.

"Crazy as a bug," he said. "I've heard tales about her. These movie stars give me a pain. This dame is always in a jam, but she buys her way out. This little outing's going to cost her something. Well, come on, I ain't got all day."

We continued on our way to the station.

2

It was our first visit to San Francisco, and neither of us knew where to find the kind of place we were looking for. We took a traffic cop into our confidence and told him we wanted a good meal and some fun. Where did he suggest ?

He put his foot on the running board, pushed his hat to the back of his head, and regarded us with a kindly eye. At least, he regarded Clair with a kindly eye I don't think he even noticed me.

"Well, miss, if you want a night out you couldn't do better than Joe's. It's the nicest joint in town, and that's saying a lot."

"Listen, brother," I said, leaning over Clair so he could see my tuxedo. "We want class with our fun tonight. Nothing's too good for us. I'm burning to spend dough, and low dives are off the agenda."

He gave me a fishy look. "I still say Joe's," he said. "It has plenty of class, and you have a good time as well. If you don't want Joe's, you can go drive into the harbour Why should I worry my head?"

It seemed as if it had to be Joe's. We thanked him, asked him the way.

He told us. In fact, he did everything except draw a map.

"Tell Joe I sent you," he said, winking. "Patrolman O'Brien. Tell him, and you'll get special treatment."

After we had driven a block, I said: "Now, we'll ask someone else. I bet that flatfoot is just a talent scout for Joe's."

Clair said she would like to go to Joe's.

"If it's no good, we can always go somewhere else," she argued.

We found Joe's down a side street. There was nothing gaudy nor deluxe about the place; no doorman to help you out of your car, no one to tell you where to park, no awning, no carpet. It was just a door in the wall with a neon sign: JOE'S.

"Well, here we are, sweetheart," I said "Do I leave the car here or do we take it inside?"

"You knock on the door and ask," Clair said severely. "The way you behave you'd imagine you'd never been to a joint before."

"Not in a tuxedo I haven't," I said, getting out of the car. "It makes me kind of shy." I rapped on the door, waited.

The door was opened by a thickset man with a tin ear, and a broken nose. He had squashed himself into a boiled shirt, and he looked no more comfortable in it than if he'd been wearing a hair shirt.

"Good evening," I said. "We have come to eat. Patrolman O'Brien recommended this place. How about it?"

"That jerk always recommends us," the thickset man said, spat past me into the street. "As if we want his lousy recommendations. Well, now you're here, you'd better come in."

"What do I do with the car?" I asked, a little startled.

He stared at the Buick, shrugged.

"I wouldn't know," he said. "Maybe you can trade it in for a fur coat, if you want a fur coat."

I tapped him on his chest. "Listen, my fine friend," I said, "I've taken bigger guys than you and made tomato juice out of them."

He looked interested, surprised.

"Who, for instance?"

Clair joined us.

"How are you going?" she asked me.

"Fine," I said. "I was just about to smack this punk's ears down. His manners come out of a zoo."

The thickset man regarded Clair with goggling eyes. He simpered at her.

"Would you please let us in ?" she said, smiling at him. "I've heard so much about Joe's."

"Sure," he said, standing aside, "come right in." He caught my eyes, said: "Put the heep down that alley. If a cop spots it here he'll have you for obstruction."

"Wait," I said to Clair, drove the Buick down the alley, walked back.

Together we mounted stairs.

The thickset man stared after us.

Clair whispered that he was looking at her ankles, and wasn't he a lamb!

I said if I thought he could see more than her ankles I'd turn him into mutton.

A check girl in peach-bloom Chinese pyjamas came over to take my hat. She gave me a faint leer when Clair wasn't looking. I leered back.

The lobby had the lush look of a drop curtain for a high-class musical comedy. It was all tinsel and glitter. Even the mirrors that hung on the walls were tinted pink to make you feel better than you looked. To the right of the lobby was the entrance to the dining-room. The captain of waiters stood in the doorway, menu in hand, and officiated like a well-fed Greek god.

On the other side of the lobby was the bar, luxurious under indirect lighting. The rattle of ice cubes in a shaker made sweet music.

"This is really something," I said, speaking out of the corner of my mouth. "I don't think there'll be much of our nine hundred bucks profit left by the time this joint's through with us."

"You can always order a glass of milk and tell them you belong to an obscure religious order," Clair murmured, and drifted away to the ladies' room.

I stood around, tried to look as if I spent my whole life in this kind of atmosphere, didn't succeed very well.

A girl who I assumed was out of the cabaret strutted across the lobby. Except for a G-string and two gold saucepan lids where they were most needed she was as bare as the back of my hand. When I gaped at her she sneered in disdain.

As she passed me, I said quietly, "Don't go sitting on a cane-bottomed chair."

Her long slinky stride faltered, but she kept on. I tried not to peep at her naked back, but I peeped just the same. I decided I was going to like this place.

Clair came out of the ladies' room. Her dress looked like sea-water sifted over with gold dust.

"Hello," she said.

"Hello," I said, leering at her. "My wife's left me. Shall we go off together and have fun?"

"Wouldn't she mind?" Clair asked gravely.

"She'd be wild," I returned, "but I'm infatuated with your dress. Let's go and neck in my car."

"You mean now—this very minute?"

"Why not?" I said.

She slipped her arm through mine. "Don't let's pretend I'm not your wife," she said. "I like being your wife."

"I'm glad and proud about that, Mrs. Cain," I said, and meant it. "Shall we talk to that important-looking gentleman with the menus and see what he would like us to eat?"

She nodded.

We presented ourselves to the captain of waiters. He bowed to Clair, bowed to me.

"This is our first visit," I explained. "We want a good time. Can we leave it to you?"

"Certainly, monsieur," he returned, his voice was as dry as sand. "Perhaps you would care to decide what you will eat first, and then perhaps you would like to visit our cocktail bar? The cabaret begins at eleven. I will arrange a table near the floor for you."

I wasn't kidding myself he was making a fuss of me. He was making a fuss of Clair.

We decided, after some thought and discussion, to have anti-pasto, steaks broiled over charcoal, hashed brown potatoes in cream, combination salads and a bottle of Liebfraumlich.

The captain of waiters wrote the order in a little gold-covered note-book, bowed, said it would be ready for us in half an hour. He personally conducted us to the cocktail bar, signalled to the barman, left us.

"Royal stuff," I said to Clair. "I believe they've all fallen in love with you."

She shook her head. "It's your determined chin and blue eyes."

I knew she was wrong.

The barman waited, admiring Clair without attempting to conceal the fact. He glanced at me; there was respectful envy in his eyes.

I ordered two large, very dry martinis.

We went over to a sofa seat, sat down, lit cigarettes. People looked at us, but we didn't worry. We were happy enough in our own company. After a while, the barman brought the drinks. I

paid him, tipped him, and he went away silently, as if drawn along on wheels.

We sipped the martinis. They were very good.

There was something about the hard standard of prettiness of the women at the bar that reminded me of Lydia Hamilton. I said as much to Clair.

"Don't let's talk about her," Clair said. "She was ghastly. I was so sorry for Hones. She hurt him terribly."

"Not half as much as the judge hurt her," I said with a grin. "Bones is a good lad. I think I'll give him a raise. Do you think it'd be an idea to give him a uniform as well; a red and white check overall or something? I think all the boys might wear a uniform. It'd give the joint tone."

She laughed. "Darling, I'm so glad you like your old gas station. There was a time——"

"Forget it," I said, taking her hand. "It's fun, but it wouldn't be fun without you."

"Honest?"

I nodded. "If it wasn't for you, I'd be still kicking around as a bum."

"I have an idea," she said, looking at me out of the corners of her eyes. "Now, don't say no until I've explained. How would it be if we opened a restaurant ? We could use the waste ground by the house. It needn't be an elaborate building. We could serve meals out of doors.

Barbecue cooking: chicken, steaks, spareribs, the way we know how to cook them, salad and things. I'd love to organize it all if you'd let me."

I stared at her. "It's a terrific idea," I exclaimed. "However did you think of it?"

Her face brightened. "Oh, I wanted to help. I know I run the house, but I'd rather make some money. Shall we?"

"We'll find out how much it'll cost to put up a suitable building first thing tomorrow," I said, and we forgot our surroundings in the discussion that followed.

After a while, I noticed Clair wasn't concentrating. I looked at her, saw she was flushed, said: "What's on your mind, honey? Got an attack of grippe?"

She didn't smile, shook her head, looked away. "Promise you won't make a scene?" she whispered.

"I never make scenes," I said. "What's wrong?"

"There's a man over the way who hasn't taken his eyes off me since he came in," she said. "He's making me uncomfortable. Now, please ..."

I looked across the room, located a man in a white dinner-jacket sitting on his own. He had grey hair. There was nothing unusual about his heavy handsome face except a small puckered scar on his left check that had almost the effect of a dimple.

I gave him the hard eye, and he immediately looked away.

"Well, anyway," I said, putting down my empty glass, "it's time we had something to eat. If he really bothers you I'll talk to him."

"You're not to," she said, walking across the bar at my side. "Those days are over."

The barman bowed to her as we left. She gave him a nice smile. I was very proud of her.

The captain of waiters personally conducted us to our seats. The table he had reserved for us was on the edge of the dance floor. I noticed a number of the men diners looked at Clair. She was worth looking at.

We sat down. The antipasto was fine. There were salty anchovies bedded on a firm slice of tomato; scarlet peppers soaked in white

vinegar; thin bologna sausages; fat white shrimps; transparent slices of ham, and celery stuffed with cottage cheese. We had two large dry martinis to go with it.

Half-way through the meal, the man in the white dinner-jacket wandered in. He seemed to be known. People nodded to him as he stalked between the tables. He passed close to us, and gave Clair a long penetrating stare. She avoided his eyes. I scowled at him, but he didn't notice. He sat a couple of tables away from us, waved to the waiter, ordered a Rye straight. He lit a cigarette, settled down to stare at Clair.

"I think I'll drop over and talk to that masher," I said, suddenly very angry.

Clair gripped my arm. "No, darling, don't. It'll spoil everything, and I'm having a lovely time. Please, let's forget him. I don't mind."

She began talking about the restaurant idea, but neither of us had much heart for it now. She was worried, and I was getting madder every moment.

Then suddenly I saw her stiffen. I followed the direction of her eyes. Lydia Hamilton had just entered. She swept down the aisle between the tables before the captain of waiters could escort her, arrived at the table occupied by the man in the white dinner-jacket, sat down. He glanced at her in a bored way, waved to the waiter.

"Now, perhaps we'll have rest from that guy," I said. "I'm sorry to see that dame here, but she won't spoil my dinner."

The waiter served the broiled steak. It looked very good. For a while we ate. Then I looked up suddenly. The masher was at it again. His half-closed eyes were probing Clair—X-ray eyes.

I looked at Lydia Hamilton. She was on to him. Her face was hard, furious.

"We're going to have some trouble," I said to Clair in an undertone. "That dame's crazy enough to start anything." I thought it best to warn her.

The words were scarcely out of my mouth when Lydia smacked the man in the white dinnerjacket across his face. He wasn't expecting anything like that, and he nearly fell off his chair. The sound of the smack cracked through the big dining-room. There was a sudden hush, then Lydia's strident voice shrilled, "Take your eyes off that

whore."

I found myself on my feet. Clair hung on to my sleeve The grey-haired man cursed Lydia in a loud clear voice, calling her about six'names that are not usually mentioned by handsome men in white dinner-jackets. Then he drew back his fist, punched her in the face.

Lydia fell out of her chair, blood from her nose ran down her chin. People stood up, craned their necks. A woman screamed. The captain of waiters began a slow, cautious walk towards the scene.

The man in the white dinner-jacket stood over Lydia. He continued to curse her; then he drew back his foot to kick her. I jerked my sleeve free from Clair's clutch, jumped towards him.

There was a sharp crack of gunfire. A spurt of flame came from Lydia's hand. The man in the white dinner-jacket coughed" once, twice, folded at the knees. He went down. I grabbed the toy gun out of Lydia's hand. She clawed me down the face with her free hand. I pushed her away, stood back. She stared up at me, her eyes becoming sane again.

"Hello, Hick," she said. "Why couldn't you keep your cheap floozie where she belongs?"

I turned from her, looked down at the man lying on the floor. I decided she wouldn't be able to buy herself out of this jam.

3

Believe me, when a Hollywood movie actress takes it into her head to shoot her boy friend in a swank night club, all hell starts popping.

As soon as it was discovered that the man in the white dinner-jacket was dead, everyone made a dive for the doors. But the captain of waiters was one jump ahead of them. The doors were closed, and the thickset man from downstairs stood with his back against them. He grinned evilly at the crowd, flexed his muscles, invited anyone to try to pass him. The crowd decided that after all they weren't in a hurry to leave.

"Will you all please take your seats?" the captain of waiters said smoothly. "The police are on the way, and no one may leave without permission."

People went back to their tables, leaving Lydia alone with her dead. She stood over the body, a serviette held to her bleeding nose. She was still drunk enough not to realize that the man in the white dinner-jacket was dead. She kept stirring him with her foot, saying, "Get up, you swine. You can't scare me," but she was beginning to sense the jam she was in, and her voice was going off-key.

It took the police six minutes by my watch to arrive. They came in: three plain-clothes men, four in uniform, a doctor, a photographer and the D.A.'s man.

They went to work in the usual efficient way policemen go to work. It was only when the doctor signed to a couple of the uniformed men to cover the body with a table-cloth that the nicklc dropped in Lydia's befuddled mind. As they draped the cloth over the body, she let out a screech that set everyone's teeth on edge.

"Okay, sister," the Homicide man said, tapping her arm. "Take it easy. It won't get you anywhere."

She looked wildly around the room: saw me.

"It's all your fault, you——" she screamed. "It was you who spoilt my lovely car."

People stood on chairs to look at me. The Homicide man gave me a hard stare. I sat there, looked back. There was nothing else I could do.

It was a pretty nasty moment.

Lydia suddenly made a dive at me, but the cops grabbed her.

"Get her out of here," the Homicide man said as she began to curse. Even his face registered disgust.

Things quieted down when she had gone. The Homicide man came over to me, asked where I figured in this.

"She's crazy drunk," I said. "I don't figure in it at all. I only grabbed her gun."

"What's this about her car?"

"We had a little accident this morning. There was nothing to it."

He took out his note-book, asked me my name. I told him Jack Cain. My middle name was Jack, anyway. I gave him my address, went into details about the Cadillac, said nothing about the man in the white dinner-jacket trying to mash Clair. I guessed it would come out at the trial, but I wasn't going to help unnecessarily.

"Any idea why she shot the guy?" the Homicide man demanded.

I shook my head. "I wasn't watching them," I lied. "He suddenly punched her, began kicking her. I went to her help; before I could reach the guy, she shot him."

"Okay," he said, eyeing me over. I could see he wasn't entirely satisfied, but he had a lot on his mind. "We'll be needing you again."

I said all right, and could we go now?

He sent a cop out to check the licence tag on the Buick. The cop came back, nodded.

"Okay, you can go," the Homicide man said. "Stick close."

We made our way out of the dining-room. Eyes followed us. It was nice to get into the lobby. The captain of waiters had Clair's wrap ready. He dropped it over her shoulders, said he was sorry our evening was spoilt. He sounded as if he was really sorry.

The cigarette girl was standing on a chair, trying to see into the dining-room. Her nakedness had lost its charm for me. She eyed me curiously.

Clair was white and silent. She stood waiting while the check girl found my hat. The peachbloom pyjamas seemed tawdry, out of place in the tense atmosphere. I cursed Patrolman O'Brien. I decided I must have been crazy to have taken a recommendation from a cop.

"Just a second, sweetheart," I said to Clair, took her chiffon scarf, put it around her head, fixed it so it all but hid her face.

She regarded me with scared eyes. "I don't——"

"Yes, you do," I said. "The press are lurking outside."

I took her arm and we went down the stairs. It was only days after that I remembered I'd forgotten to ask for a check. The captain of waiters either forgot too or else he felt he couldn't ask payment for such an unsatisfactory evening.

As we stepped into the street, four men came hurrying towards us. I grabbed Clair's arm, rushed her to the alley.

The men hesitated, stopped, stared after us.

"Get in," I said, jerking open the Buick door.

A flash-light exploded in our faces. I shoved Clair into the car, turned.

A little guy was standing near me, a press camera in his hand.

"You're the guy who grabbed the gun?" he asked. "Jack Cain, ain't it?"

"Not me," I said, edging towards him. "Cain's still in there." I grabbed his camera before he could guess what I was at, whipped out the plate, dropped it on the sidewalk, trod on it.

I handed him back the camera.

"You punk!" he exclaimed. "You can't do this to me." He set himself for a swing, but I gave him a quick push, sent him staggering, got into the Buick.

I shot out of the alley.

Clair wanted to know why I had said I was Jack Cain; why

I had smashed the photographer's plate. She sounded very scared.

There was no point in keeping it from her any longer. I told her

about Lois Spence telephoning me on the night before we left Paradise Palms. I gave her an idea what Lois had said.

"I'm not kidding myself," I said, watching the road unreel beneath the head-lights. "Those two are dangerous, vicious. That's why I ducked out of sight. Maybe I was a fool. I should have put you somewhere safe and gone after them. Now we're stuck. This case is going to get a hell of a lot of publicity. We'll be in the papers. As soon as Lois knows where we are, she and Bat will start something or my guess is all wrong. That's why I gave a wrong name and smashed that plate. It'll give us a little time to make up our minds what to do."

"I know what I'm going to do," she said in a steady voice, "I'm not giving up our home for them. I'm not scared as long as you're with me."

It was what I hoped she would say, but for all that, I had an uneasy feeling that our spell of peace was coming to an end.

4

We read in the morning's newspaper that Clem Kuntz, the shrewdest criminal lawyer on the Pacific Coast, was handling Lydia Hamilton's defence. I expected he'd call on us. He did.

He arrived as I was going off duty. I thought he was a customer when I saw the big Lincoln roll up the driveway, but I soon found out different.

"I want to talk to you," he said, getting out of the car. "I'm Kuntz. Maybe you've heard of me."

I had heard of him all right, even before he had taken charge of the Gray Howard Slaying, as the newspapers called it. Gray Howard was the name of the man in the white dinner-jacket. He turned out to be a big-shot movie director.

I eyed Kuntz over. He was a squat square man with a mulberry coloured face. He had the hardest eyes I'd ever seen in a man's face, and he gave me the full benefit of them. I stared right back at him, said: "Go ahead. I can give you a couple of minutes, then I want my supper."

He shook his head. "A couple of minutes won't do," he said. "Let's go somewhere where we can talk. You'd better play with me, Cain. I could put you in a hell of a spot if I felt that way."

I hesitated, decided that maybe he could put me in a spot, jerked my head to the house.

"Then you'd better come in."

We went into the house, and I showed him into the front room. He looked round, grunted, took up a position by the window. I sat in the easy chair, yawned, pulled my nose, said, "Shoot."

"You married?" he asked abruptly.

I nodded. "What of it?"

"I'd like to meet your wife."

I shook my head. "Not before you tell me what's on your mind," I said. "I'm particular whom she meets."

His eyes snapped. "Scared to let me see her?" he barked.

I laughed at him. "You're wasting time," I said; "come off your high horse."

The door opened and Clair came in. She was wearing a cute frilly apron over a simple little frock in sky blue. She looked a kid, and a pretty one at that.

"Oh, I'm sorry . . ." she said, backing out.

"Come in," I said. "This is Mr. Clem Kuntz. The *Mr. Kuntz*." I looked at the mulberry coloured face. "This is my wife. Satisfied?"

He was looking narrowly at Clair. There was an expression of startled dismay in his eyes.

I suddenly got what he was driving at. I grinned.

"Not what you expected?" I said. "I bet your client told you she was hard, brassy, and on the make."

He drew in a deep breath, bowed to Clair.

"I merely wanted to know, Mrs. Cain, if you spoke to Gray Howard on the night of his death," he said, clinging to the shreds of his dignity.

She looked at me, shook her head.

"Look, Mr. Kuntz," I said, "I know what you hope to establish. It's to your client's advantage if you can prove that Clair was trying to make Howard. She wasn't, and I don't think, however hard you try, you'd ever convince a jury she was. Howard was propositioning her. I wanted to fix him, but Clair didn't want a scene. We had been working hard for three months, and it was our first night out together. It was our hard luck that we should run into Howard. Clair didn't encourage him. Your client was sore because Howard couldn't keep his eyes to himself. But that didn't cause the murder. It touched it off, but it had been coming to a head for some time. A guy doesn't punch a woman in the lace unless he's sick to death of her. It was the punch that killed Howard . . . not Clair."

Kuntz cleared his throat, grunted.

"I wonder if you always look like that," he said to Clair, speaking his thoughts out aloud.

"She'll look like that at the trial, if you decide to call her," I said. "And she'll hurt your client's case if you try to make out she's a vamp."

He passed his fat hand over his bald head, frowned. He knew when he was licked.

"I don't think I'll call her," he said. "All right, Cain, I guess I 'm wasting time. I thought your wife would be a different type." He looked wistfully at Clair, shook his head, went.

We breathed again. Maybe it was going to work out all right. Maybe we weren't going to get any publicity.

The District Attorney's man was the next to call. He had a report from the State Highway cop who had arrested Lydia on the drunk while driving charge. As soon as he learned that Lydia had tried to wreck the Cadillac with me in it, he hotfooted over to see me. He said it was just the kind of evidence he wanted. It proved that Lydia was a dangerous drunk, and it'd carry a lot of weight with the jury. I tried to talk him out of it, but he was too burned up with the idea.

The next morning the press had the story.

They began arriving before we had breakfast, and they crawled all over us. The little guy who had tried to photograph us on the night of the murder was well in the forefront. He snarled at me, and there was nothing I could do about it.

"Hello, wise guy," he said. "So you don't like publicity? My editor will sure fix you for smashing that plate."

Flash-lights exploded around us for the next hour. We tried to duck out of sight, but it was like a siege. When they had gone, I went upstairs, hunted out Bat's .38. I sat on the bed, cleaned, oiled and loaded it. It seemed odd to have a gun banging against my side again. I didn't like the feel of it any more. I was worried too that I was so much slower on the draw than I used to be. It was nearly four months since I pulled a gun, and I knew I'd have to get in some practice if I was going to match Bat.

Clair found me practising.

I pulled her down on the bed beside me.

"I think I'll send you away," I said. "If Bat's going to start anything, he'll get at me through you. We'll have to think where you can go."

She shook her head. "It's no use running away, darling," she said. "They may never come after us, and we'd be separated for months, waiting. Besides, they want me at the trial and things could happen then if they're going to happen at all. Let's stick together. I'd never have a moment's peace without you." She flung her arms around my neck. "I don't care what you say. I'm not going to leave you."

I thought for a moment, decided she was right.

"We'll wait for them," I said.

I was expecting something pretty bad from the newspapers, but nothing as bad as the front page of the *Clarion,* the paper my friend the photographer worked on. They had dug up the whole story of Paradise Palms and had smeared it all over the front page with photographs of myself, Clair, the service station, Killeano and even Clairbold, the boy wonder.

I took one look, cursed.

5

As the weeks went by and nothing happened, we gradually relaxed. But we still took precautions. I carried a gun, I continued to practice, and I regained my speed. We had a couple of fierce police dogs around the house, but no one can continue to be keyed up all the time waiting for trouble if trouble doesn't come.

At first, we both had the jitters, catching each other listening to any unusual sound, breaking off our conversation at an approaching step, looking uneasily at each other whenever the telephone rang. But that kind of tension doesn't last. After the fourth week we were almost back to normal, although I took care never to approach any car that came into the station unless I could see the driver. If I couldn't see who was driving, I sent Bones. I never did a night shift either.

Lydia Hamilton's trial was a three-day sensation. Kuntz knew she hadn't a chance to beat the rap so he pleaded her guilty, but insane. The D.A. was after her blood, and he didn't call me, as my evidence would have helped establish the fact that she was insane.

Kuntz got his verdict after a terrific battle, and after the usual ballyhoo from the press the story died a natural death.

A week after the trial, and five weeks after the newspapers had first discovered me, Lois Spence showed her hand.

I had finished for the night, and had handed over to Ben the old guy who handled the night shift, when the telephone in the office rang.

"I'll answer it," I said to Ben as a car came up the driveway.

I returned to the office, lifted the receiver.

"Cain?" a woman's voice asked.

I knew at once who it was. I felt my lips lift off my teeth in a mirthless smile. So it had come at last.

"Hello, Lois," I said. "I was expecting you to call."

"Like the wait?" she asked, a jeer in her voice.

"All right. It gave me time to prepare for you. Coming to see me?"

"You bet I am," she said, "but it'll have to be a surprise. Don't be embarrassed, we won't expect you to dress."

I laughed, although I didn't feel like laughing.

"How's Bat?" I asked.

"He's fine. I shouldn't laugh, Cain. You won't like it when we do come."

"Why don't you grow up?" I said. "You always were a dumb red-head. Do you think I care what you do? I can handle Bat and you. Tell him. And don't forget, Lois, if you slip up, you'll have a nice stretch in jail ahead of you. Bat's wanted for murder and that makes you an accessory after the fact. Thought of that?"

"Listen, you heel," she said, losing her smooth tone. "I've waited too long to even things up with you. It's been fun making you sweat, but I'm through with waiting now."

"Watch your elastic, sister," I said. "There's no need to get excited. Tell me, what do you plan to do, or is that a secret?"

"What do you think? We'll get that girl of yours, and then we'll invite you to call and see her. Bat still wants to match his skill against yours."

"With an empty gun, of course," I said.

"Not this time," Lois returned. "He's been getting ready for you. He's wise to that loose holster trick now. You won't pull another gag like that. Well, so long, Cain. We'll be around, so make hay while there's a sun." She hung up.

I stood thinking, then I went out, climbed into the Buick. "Tell Mrs. Cain I won't be twenty minutes," I said to Ben, drove on to the highway.

I paid a visit to the police-station, asked to see Lieutenant Mallory.

Mallory and I knew each other well. He was always passing the service station, and he knew where he could get iced beer with a smile from Clair whenever he wanted it.

"What's on your mind, Cain?" he asked, offering me a cigarette.

I took it. We lit up. "I want protection," I said.

He gaped at me, burst into a roar of laughter. "That's rich," he said. "You want protection. I don't believe it. Why you're the original tough egg."

"I know," I said, "but this is different. My shooting days are over. Take a pew, Lieutenant, I want to tell you a story."

I gave him the story, told him Bat was after us, and that Lois had just called me.

"You're not scared of a punk like Thompson, are you?" he asked, blankly.

"I didn't say I was scared of anyone," I said patiently. "I'm respectable now. My wild days are over. I own a wife and a service station. I'm not risking being sent to jail or the chair because you boys can't do your job."

He eyed me thoughtfully. "Well, we'll keep an eye on your place," he said. "Will that do?"

"That's what I want, and suppose Bat turns up when your eye isn't on the place. What then?"

"You deal with him. You'd be within your rights."

I shook my head. "I've killed about six men now and pleaded self defence. That plea is wearing a little thin. A bright lawyer might sway a jury and rail-road me to the chair. I'm through with that stuff. Have me made a deputy sheriff. I haven't even a permit for this rod."

"Don't show me," he said, hurriedly closing his eyes. "I don't want to know about it. I can't make you a deputy sheriff. Maybe the D.A. might play."

I had an idea. "Say, Bat's wanted by the Federal Office. Maybe . . ."

"Try them," Mallory said. "In the meantime I'll detail a patrolman to keep an eye on your place."

I thanked him, drove over to the Federal Bureau, asked to see someone in charge.

It took me an hour, but I came out with a gun permit, and a piece of paper which stated that I was temporarily attached to the Federal Office as special investigator. A long distance call to Hoskiss had got me that.

I was late back for supper, and Clair was worried, but as soon as she saw the light in my eye, she brightened.

"Where have you been?" she asked, leading me into the dining-room where supper was waiting.

I told her about Lois; showed her the gun permit and my authority.

"I'm a G-man now," I said. "How do you like that?"

She looked a little scared, but tried to hide it.

"I like it fine," she said. "There's a cop in the kitchen eating apple pie. He said he had been detailed to keep an eye on me until you returned."

I laughed. "Swell idea," I said. "Well, I'm ready for Bat now. I don't think they'll come after you, honey. Lois wouldn't have told me if that was their idea."

Three days went by, and still nothing happened. Every three hours a patrolman would look in, wink at Clair, say "No trouble?" shrug and go on his way.

I didn't relax this time. I was sure something would happen before long, and if I didn't keep on my toes, I'd be surprised.

It happened the following night.

We had gone to bed about eleven. I had locked the bedroom door, bolted it. I had fixed the mesh-wire screen over the open window. No one could get in our room without waking us.

It was a clear moonlight night, and the night air was hot. Ben had been busy up to ten-thirty, and now trade had slackened off.

Clair and I lay side by side in the big double bed. I was half asleep when I heard a car drive up. I thought nothing of it, relaxed, began to drift off. Then suddenly I was wide awake, listening. Clair also sat up, looked at me in the dim light, whispered, "What is it?"

I shook my head. "I don't know. Did you hear anything?"

"I thought I did," she said. "But I'm not sure."

We listened. Silence.

"A car came in a minute or so ago," I whispered. "It hasn't gone." I

swung my feet to the floor. "I don't hear Ben around I"

I went to the window. A big Plymouth sedan stood on the driveway. There was no sign of Ben nor the driver.

I waited, frowning.

Footsteps sounded on the concrete below, feet scraped, paused, came on. A woman's shadow came into my vision. I couldn't see the woman unless I moved the screen and leaned out of the window. I wasn't going to do that. I studied the shadow.

A sudden electric thrill ran down my back. I thought I recognized the shape.

I turned quickly, grabbed my trousers, slipped them on, dragged on socks, shoes, snatched up my gun.

"Have they come?" Clair asked in a small voice.

"I think so," I said grimly. "There's a woman down there. I think it's Lois. Stay here. I'm going to have a look."

She whipped out of bed, clung to me.

"No, don't," she said. "Please, darling. Let's call the police. They want you to go out there. They'll be waiting for you."

I patted her arm. "Okay, we'll call for the police," I said. "You better get some clothes on."

I slipped out of the room, crept down the stairs. It was dark. I moved cautiously, silently. I suddenly remembered what Clairbold had once said about the art of stalking. It occurred to me that I might have put in a little practice in my room the way he had. It wasn't such a dumb idea after all.

I reached the lobby, crossed to the front room where the telephone was. We had drawn the curtains before going to bed, but I didn't risk putting the light on. I wanted them to think we hadn't heard them.

I groped around, trying to find the telephone, found it, lifted the receiver. There was no humming sound on the line. I rattled the cradle once, twice, smiled grimly, hung up. They had cut the wires.

I crossed to the window, lifted the curtain an inch, looked out. The Plymouth still stood deserted on the runway. I couldn't see the woman, but after peering round I saw a dark shape lying by the office

building. It could have been Ben or it might have been one of the dogs.

I went back to the lobby, stood listening.

Clair came to the head of the stairs; she had a flash-light in her hand.

"Keep that light off the curtains," I said softly.

"Are the police coming?" she asked.

"The line's cut," I returned. "Wait here. I'm going to look out the back."

"Don't go out," she said breathlessly. "I know that's what they expect you to do. They're watching the doors."

I thought she was probably right.

"I won't," I said, moved along the short passage to the kitchen.

Here, the blinds weren't drawn. I crawled on hands and knees across the room, raised myself, looked out of the window.

Lois Spence was out there, I saw her distinctly. She was wearing dark slacks and coat. She was looking up at the upper window. I could have shot her easily enough, but I hadn't the stomach to shoot a woman.

Clair joined me. We squatted on our heels, side by side, watching Lois, who continued to stare up at the upper windows. The moonlight was bright enough for me to see she still favoured Fatal Apple make-up. She looked as coldly disdainful as she had always looked.

"I'd like to give her a fright," I said, "but as long as Bat keeps out of sight, we'll play possum."

"Where is he?" she whispered, her hand on my arm. I was surprised it was so steady.

"I haven't seen him yet," I said. "When I do I'm going to make a little hole in his hide. I'm taking no risks with Bat."

Lois suddenly turned, walked away, heading for the front of the house.

Faintly we could hear through the closed window a clink of metal against metal.

"What's that?" Clair asked, stiffening.

I listened. Something metal dropped on the concrete, out of sight. It came from the gas-pump section of the station.

"I don't know," I said uneasily. "I wish I knew what has happened to Ben. It's not his fight. If they've hurt him . . ."

Clair's grip on my arm tightened. "Please don't do anything rash——"

"I won't, but I'm getting tired of letting these two roam around as if this is their home," I said. "I'm going into the front room. Maybe we'll see something from there."

She went with me. As we reached the lobby, a wild scream rang out. The sound came from the front of the house.

I darted forward, but Clair hung on to me.

"It's a trap," she said- "Wait . . . listen . . ."

I paused.

A car engine suddenly roared into life, gears clashed, tyres screeched on the driveway.

I darted into the sitting-room, lifted the curtains, peered out.

The Plymouth sedan was roaring down the driveway. It turned as it reached the highway, belted away into the night.

Lois Spence was lying on the concrete by the air towers.

I jumped to the front door.

"Wait," I said to Clair, threw off her restraining hand, opened the door.

"No!" she cried. "Don't!"

I slipped out, waved her back, reached Lois as she struggled to rise.

Her face was ghastly with terror. A red-blue mark showed on her face where she had been struck.

"He's lit a fuse to the gas dump," she mouthed at me. "Get me out of here! My God! We'll be blown to hell! The stinking rat double-crossed me! Get me out of here."

She grabbed at my pyjama jacket. I wrenched free, leaving a strip of

material in her hand.

"Clair!" I yelled frantically. "Quick! Come to me! Clair!"

I dashed towards the house, saw Clair in the doorway, yelled to her again.

The whole sky seemed suddenly to split open; a long tongue of orange flame rushed up into the night, and I was conscious of a tremendous noise.

I saw Clair, her hands before her face, her eyes wide with terror. I couldn't run any more. I was crouching, my hands over my ears when a blast of suffocating air struck me down.

I struggled up on my knees, saw the house sway, crumble, tried to yell, then the ground kicked up, trembled, and another tremendous explosion ripped open the shattered night sky. Blast picked me up and threw me away as the house came down like a pack of cards.

6

The nurse beckoned. I stood up, braced myself, crossed the corridor. "You can go in now," she said. "You'll keep her quiet, won't you? She's still suffering from shock."

I tried to say something, but words stuck in my throat. I nodded, went past her through the open doorway.

Clair was lying in the small bed facing me. Her head was a helmet of white bandages; her right hand was bandaged too.

We looked at each other. Her eyes smiled. I went over, stood beside her.

"Hello," she said. "We made it, darling."

"We made it all right," I said, pulling up a chair. "It was a close call, Clair. Too close. I thought I wasn't going to see you again." I sat down, took her left hand.

"I'm tough," she said. "Did they say if I—I——"

"It'll be all right," I assured her. "You're more scorched than burned. You'll look as lovely as ever when they're through with you."

"I wasn't worrying for myself," she said. "I didn't want you to have an ugly wife . . ."

"Who said I had a pretty one?" I said, kissing her hand. "Someone's been kidding yon."

She fondled my hand, stared at me.

"There's not much left of our home, is there?" she asked in a small voice.

I shook my head. "It's all gone," I said, ran my fingers through my hair, smiled at her. "It was a lovely blaze while it lasted."

Her eyes darkened. "What are you going to do, darling? You won't get unsettled?"

I patted her hand. "No. I'm going to build again. As soon as you're better we'll talk it over. I have ideas. We can build that restaurant of

yours. The joint's well insured. There won't be any trouble about money. It'll take a little time, but maybe it'll turn out to be a good thing in the long run. I never did like the position of the station. I'll rebuild it facing the road."

"What happened to them?" she asked, gripping my hand.

I knew that question had been on her mind ever since she had recovered consciousness.

"Lois is here," I said. "She was pretty badly burned. The Doc doesn't think she'll get over it."

She shivered. "You mean she's going to die?"

I nodded.

"And Bat?"

"Yeah . . . Bat. Well, they got him. He ran into a police car. There's nothing to worry about, darling. He's fixed."

I bent down, pretended to fiddle with my shoe-lace. I knew if she looked at me now I wouldn't have been able to have met her eyes, and then she'd have known I was lying. Lois was in the hospital, but Bat was still loose. I wasn't going to tell her that.

"You mean our troubles are really over?" she asked.

"You bet they are," I said, straightening. "As soon as you're well enough to leave here, we'll start right in again. You'll like that, won't you? You'll be able to have your restaurant, and we'll make a pile of dough."

She closed her eyes, relaxed.

"I did so hope you would say that, darling," she said.

The nurse looked in, beckoned.

"Well, here's the tyrant again," I said, getting up. "I'll be back tomorrow. Take it easy. We have a lot to look forward to." I kissed her lightly, touched her hand, went out.

There was another nurse waiting in the corridor.

"Miss Spence is asking for you," she said.

"Okay," I returned, looked at her. "How's she making out?"

The nurse shook her head. "She was dreadfully burned," she said. "I don't think it will be long now."

I followed her along the corridor to Lois's room. A cop paced up and down outside. He nodded to me as I went in.

Lois was lying flat. Her face hadn't been touched. They had told me that hot oil had flowed over her chest. She looked practically done.

I stood over her, waited.

She looked up, her eyes, dark with pain, searched my face.

"Hello, gambler," she said- "You had all the luck."

I didn't say anything.

She chewed her lip, frowned. "I want to talk to you."

I pulled up a chair, sat down.

"You'd better take it easy," I said. "You'll need all your strength. You're pretty ill, Lois."

"I know it," she said, her mouth twisting. "I'm through. But I wanted to see you before . . ."

"Okay, go ahead," I said, waited.

"Men have been my bad luck," she said, staring at the ceiling. "They all let me down except Juan. I was fond of Juan, Cain. I kind of went crazy when I lost him. But I should have left you alone. Evening things up isn't my strong suit—not against you, anyway. You're too lucky, Cain."

"You haven't done so badly," I said. "You blew my home and business to hell. What more do you want?"

She sneered. "But you're still here, and your girl. Juan isn't, and I'm finished too."

"Let's skip it," I said. "This won't get us anywhere."

"Bat double-crossed me," she said, spitefully.

"What did you expect? The snake would double-cross his own mother."

"My fault again," she said. "I wanted to use him to even things with you, but he thought I'd fallen for him. I ought to have played with him until this was over, but I gave him hell.

How could I fall for a filthy brute like him? I told him so, and he fixed me." She moved her legs restlessly. "They swear they've filled me full of dope, but it hurts—it hurts like hell."

I didn't say anything.

"I taught Bat how to explode the gas dump, rehearsed him for weeks. God! He was dumb. He couldn't have done it without me. He wanted to shoot you, but I had to be smart. You see, it didn't work out. I wanted to see you and your girl go up in flames along with your smug little home."

I looked away. It was no use hating her; she was dying and she'd paid for what she had done.

"You're not letting Bat get away?" she asked abruptly.

I shook my head. "Where is he ?"

"What'll you do to him?"

"Shoot or arrest him," I said. "I don't care which. One or the other."

She grimaced, sweat was running down her face. "I wish he could suffer the way I'm suffering," she said.

"Where is he?"

"He'll have cleared out of my apartment by now," she said, frowning. "He'll go to Little Louis. I think you'll find him there. He won't know where to hide. You'd've caught him long ago if it hadn't been for me. He hasn't any brains."

"Where's Little Louis?" I asked impatiently.

She gave me a downtown address in San Francisco.

"Who is he?"

"Just one of the boys," she said indifferently. "He holes up anyone on the run. Watch your step, Cain. I want you to catch Bat."

"I'll catch him," I said, standing up.

She closed her eyes.

"Well, I don't look awful," she said, "that's something, I guess. I'd hate to die ugly."

I couldn't stand the atmosphere any longer.

"So long," I said.

"Kill him for me, Cain," she said.

I went.

Waiting for me in the corridor was Tim Duval. At first, I couldn't believe my eyes.

"What did you expect?" he said, shaking hands. "As soon as we read about it, I flew up. All the boys pooled the fare. They wanted to come too, but they couldn't get away."

"Am I glad to see you," I said, slapping him on the back.

"So you should be," he said, grinning. "Hetty'll be along soon. She's coming by train. How's the kid?"

"Not so bad," I said. "She'll be all right in a month or so. It was a close call, Tim." T scowled at him, added, "I have a job for you."

He nodded. "I knew it," he said. "That's why I came. Bat, eh?"

"Sure," I said, "only you're camping outside Clair's door. So long as I know she's safe I can get to work. Now don't argue," I went on hurriedly as he began to speak. "Bat's dangerous. He might come here to finish the job. Stick around, Tim. I know Clair will be safe if you're here. I have things to do."

"Well, I'll be damned," he said. "And I was planning to get in on a man-hunt."

I punched him lightly on his chest.

"You watch Clair," I said. "This man-hunt is going to be between Bat and me." I led him to Clair's door. "Not a word about Bat. I've told her he's in jail. Go in and see her for a minute, then get a chair and park outside. I don't expect to be long."

I left him before he could protest.

7

The taxi driver slowed, stopped. "This is as far as I can take you, Bud," he said. "The joint you want is down that alley, if it is the joint you want."

I got out of the cab, peered down a narrow alley, blocked by two iron posts.

"I guess it is," I said, gave him half a buck.

"Want me to stick around?" he asked. "It don't look like your home."

"It isn't, but don't wait," I said, and walked towards the alley.

It was dark; mist from the sea softened the gaunt outlines of the buildings. The single street lamp made a yellow pool of light on the slimy sidewalk. Not far away a ship's siren hooted. The sound of moving water against the harbour walls was distinct.

I lit a cigarette, moved on. Little Louis had selected a lonely spot for a home, I thought. The buildings I passed were warehouses, most of them in disuse. The property, the taxi driver had told me, had been condemned and was going to be pulled down. It should have been pulled down long ago.

A half-starved black cat appeared out of the shadows, twisted itself around my legs. I stooped, scratched its head, went on. The cat followed me.

Little Louis's place was the last building in a row of battered wooden ruins. I flipped my cigarette into a puddle, stood back, looked up at the house. The cat moved delicately towards the puddle, sniffed at the cigarette, howled dismally.

"Some joint, puss," I said.

The building was a three-storey job; no lights showed, most of the windows had rotten planks nailed across them. It was a proper dump, the kind of building Hollywood favours when creating a chiller atmosphere.

I tried to get round the back of the building, but found it looked on to a kind of reservoir. The stillness and blackness of the water was deceptive. It looked solid.

I went back to the front of the building, tried the front door. It was locked. I prowled around, found a lower window, tried to move it, but it wouldn't budge. I went to the next window, heaved. It creaked loudly. I cursed the plank, took out my gun, forced the barrel backwards and forwards until the plank broke away from its rusty nails. I made less noise than I expected. I hoped no one had heard the first creak, which had been something.

I worked on the next plank, got rid of it, and was ready to squeeze through. I looked into the room beyond, saw nothing but darkness, heard nothing. I fished out an electric torch from my hip pocket, turned the beam into the room. It was unfurnished, dirty; a rat scurried away from the light.

With my gun in my right fist, I stepped over the sill, down into the room.

The cat jumped up on the sill, peered at me. I shooed it away. It seemed reluctant to leave me, but it went eventually, jumping down into the darkness outside.

A full minute of breathless listening got me nowhere. Holding my gun-arm tight against my side, I began exploring the room. There were footprints in the dust on the floor; a hand-print by the door. The place smelt of decay, bad drains.

I reached the door, turned the handle, pulled the door gently towards me. I peeped into a dingy passage, lit by a naked gas-jet. I listened. Nothing.

Sliding my torch back into my pocket, I edged out of the room into the passage. Another door faced me. To my right was the front door; to my left a flight of stairs. They looked rotten and broken, and there were no banisters. It was some hide-out.

I crept across the passage to the opposite door, put my ear against the panel, listened. After a moment or so I heard feet scrape on the wooden floor.

I wondered if Bat was behind the door. My heart was beating steadily; I wasn't excited. I had come to kill Bat, and I was going to kill him.

My hand slid over the brass door-knob. I squeezed it, turned slowly. It made no sound as it turned. When it wouldn't turn any further, I pushed.

I looked into a narrow, dimly lit room full of wooden packing-cases stacked up along the unpapered walls. In the centre of the room was a table and chair. Near the rusty stove stood a truckle bed, covered with a grimy blanket.

Little Louis sat at the table. He had a deck of greasy playing-cards in his hand, and he was laying out a complicated patience game. He raised his head as I stepped into the room.

Little Louis was a hunchback. The complexion of his dried-up face looked as if it had been sand-blasted. His hard little eyes glinted under thick black eyebrows. His shapeless mouth, like a pale pink sausage split in two, hung open.

He stared at me, his right hand, hairy and dirty, edged off the table to his lap.

"Hold it," I said, lifted the .38.

His mouth tightened, snarled, but his hand crept back on to the table again.

I moved further into the room, closed the door with my heel, advanced.

He watched me, puzzled, suspicious.

"What do you want ?" he asked. His voice was high-pitched, effeminate.

"Get away from the table," I said, pausing within a few feet of him.

He hesitated, pushed back the wooden box on which he was sitting, stood up. Something fell to the floor off his lap. I glanced down. A broad, squat knife lay at his feet. It looked very sharp, deadly.

"Get back to the wall," I said, advancing on him.

He retreated, his hands raised to his shoulders. There was no shock of fear in his eyes. As I passed the knife I picked it up, dropped it into my pocket.

"Where's Bat Thompson?" I asked.

His eyes narrowed. "Who wants him?"

"You'd better talk," I said. "I'm in a hurry."

He grinned evilly. "You've made a mistake," he said. "I don't know any Bat Thompson."

I edged towards him. "You'd better talk," I said.

"Who are you? You're new to the racket, ain't you? Guys don't threaten me. I'm everyone's pal."

"Not mine," I said, smacked him across his face with the barrel of my gun.

His head jerked back. A red weal appeared on his harsh skin. His eyes glinted murderously.

"Where's Bat?" I repeated.

He snarled at me so I hit him again.

"I can keep this up all night," I told him pleasantly, grinned. "Where's Bat?"

He pointed to the ceiling. "Top floor; the door facing the stairs." He began to curse me softly, a mumbling flow of obscenity.

"Alone?" I said, lifting my hand, threatening him.

"Yeah," he said.

I studied him. He was too dangerous to leave. I decided to provoke him into a fight. It turned out to be a dumb idea.

I nodded, shoved the .38 down the waist-band of my trousers. "Why couldn't you have said so before?" I asked. "It'd've saved you a lot of grief."

Two terrifying long arms shot out towards me; arms that seemed to stretch like elastic. I thought I was well out of his reach, and was waiting for him to jump me, but the arms came as a surprise. Two hands clamped on my wrists. They felt as if they had been welded to my flesh. He jerked me towards him.

He had twice my strength and the jerk nearly snapped my neck. I cannoned against him, felt his hands whip up to my throat. He was a shade too slow. I got my chin down, so he gripped that; before he could dig his claws into my neck, I sank a punch into his belly with all my weight behind it. He doubled up, snarling, and as I rushed him, he swung his fist, clouted me on the side of the head. It was like being hit with a hammer. I found myself lying on my side, bells ringing in my

ears. I twisted over, saw through a red mist the misshapen legs moving towards the door. I grabbed at them, hung on, pulled him down. He fell close, squirmed around and uncorked another sledge-hammer blow. I ducked under it, felt it whizz past my head. My right hand yanked out the .38; holding it in my fist, I punched him in the face with it.

He gibbered with pain, got close, his evil-smelling head under my chin. He clawed at my body with steel fingers. I continued to hit him about his face and head with the gun butt. I couldn't get much steam into the blows because he was lying on top of me, but I succeeded in making a mess of his face.

He got sick of it before I did, scrambled away, opened his mouth to yell. I rammed the gun barrel into his open mouth.

"Make a sound and I'll blow your top," I said.

The cold gun barrel in his mouth terrified him. He gagged, tried to wriggle away, but I forced the barrel further down his throat. He grabbed my wrists, yanked. The barrel shot out of his mouth, but the gun-sight caught his front teeth; they shot out too. He yammered in his throat, flung me off, raised himself up, half crazy with rage and pain, slammed down at me with both fists. If they had landed he would have flattened me, but I rolled against him, stabbed him in his belly with the gun barrel.

He gave a croaking howl, fell back, holding on to himself. Blood oozed between his fingers.

I knelt over him, panting, belted him between the eyes. He passed out.

Getting to my feet I fought to recover my breath. My legs felt weak, my heart thumped furiously. We had only fought for a couple of minutes, but it had been an experience. He had been as strong as an ape.

I left him, made for the stairs. I started up, my hand on the wall, treading cautiously. The stairs were in a bad way, gave under my weight. I kept on, mounted to the first floor, listened.

From one room I heard voices. A woman cursed in a shrill hard tone. A man yelled to her to shut up. I walked along the passage, made for the next flight of stairs.

The door behind me jerked open. I glanced around. A thin,

miserable-looking woman half fell into the passage. She wore a dirty kimono, and her hair hung loose.

"Save me, mister," she gasped, crouching against the wall.

A big, red-faced man, in shirt sleeves, stepped into the passage, grabbed the woman by her hair, dragged her into the room again. The door slammed. The woman began to squeal.

Ignoring her, I mounted the next flight of stairs. I was sweating, uneasy. This was a hell of a joint, I decided.

A naked gas-jet burned at the head of the stairs. It hissed and flickered in the draught. I paused as I reached the landing, looked back. Nothing moved. No one showed.

If Little Louis had been telling the truth I was now facing

Bat's door. I stepped across the passage, put my ear against the door, listened.

A woman said: "God! I'm sick of this. I was crazy to throw in with a mean jerk like you."

I frowned, slipped back the safety catch of the .38, put my hand on the door handle.

Bat said: "Aw, the hell with you! I'm sick of you too." His harsh Brooklyn accent was unmistakable.

I opened the door, went in.

8

A girl, wearing black lace underwear, had her back to me as I entered. Her legs and feet were bare, her blonde hair piled untidily to the top of her head. A cheap imitation tortoise-shell comb failed to capture the straggling ends of hair from her neck. She was standing by a table on which was the remains of a meal and several bottles of whisky.

She turned swiftly as she heard the door open, stared at me. All I could see of Bat was his foot and leg. The girl stood directly in front of him. She was sharp-featured and she stared at me with sultry eyes, one of which was puffed and the other had been socked several days ago. She also had a bruise on her throat and her hand held a tall cool glass of amber fluid.

"Beat it," she said to me. "You've picked the wrong room."

"I want Bat," I said between my teeth. "Get out of the way."

She saw the gun, screamed, dropped the glass.

Bat recognized my voice, grabbed the girl around her waist, crushed her to him. He peered over her shoulder at me, grinned.

"Hello, bub," he said. His brutal face was the colour of mutton fat.

"Let go of the frail," I said. "What's the matter with you. Bat? Milky?"

The girl struggled frantically to get away, but Bat easily held her. I could see his thick fingers sinking into the loose flesh above her hips.

"Shaddap, you," he snarled in her ear, "or I'll break your goddamn back."

She stopped struggling, faced me, her eyes wide with terror, staring at the gun like an idiot child at a moving shadow.

It puzzled me why Bat didn't go for his gun. I saw his pig eyes glaring, followed the direction. A Luger lay on the mantelpiece, out of his reach.

I laughed. "For God's sake," I said, "getting careless, aren't you, Hat?" I jumped across the room to the gun. It was my own Luger.

Bat shuffled round, still holding the girl in front of him. He cursed softly, vilely, backed.

I had left the door unguarded by my move to the gun. Bat jerked it open, stepped into the passage, dragging the screaming girl with him. The door slammed.

I snatched up the Luger, shoved the .38 into my pocket, ran to the door. The passage outside was in darkness.

A door opened at the end of the passage, a man's head appeared. I fired above it. The head jerked back, the door slammed. Voices sounded below. A man bawled up to know what was going on. At the head of the stairs the blonde screamed wildly for help. Her scream was throttled back into her throat.

If Bat had been on his own I'd have nailed him then, but I couldn't see, and I didn't want to kill the girl. I swore softly, moved out into the passage.

Bat suddenly yelled: "Gimme a gun, Mike. Quick!"

I ran towards the sound of his voice. I could just see him with the girl held in front of him, crouching against the wall at the head of the stairs.

"Come out of it, you yellow rat," I said, caught hold of the girl's arm.

She kicked out, screamed like a train whistle.

Bat made himself small behind her, cursed me, hung on.

"Let go of her," I panted, dodging her kicks. One of them caught me in the stomach, winded me for a moment.

I heard footsteps pounding up the stairs, turned.

The red-faced man from the next landing was rushing up, a gun in his hand. He fired wildly at me. The bullet slapped into the wall above my head. I shot him between the eyes. He went down like a pole-axed bull.

I heard a grunt from Bat, spun around. I hadn't a chance to get out of the way. Bat had caught up the girl, held her above his head. He flung her at me as I tried to dodge. Screaming frantically, she sailed through the air like a shell. She hit me chest high. I went over, heard her wail, then crash through the rotten banisters and thud to the landing below.

Bat rushed down the stairs, missed his step, jumped. He landed with a crash as I fired after him.

I waited, listened.

A ghastly sobbing sound from the girl drifted up the wall of the staircase.

I peered over the rotten rail into darkness.

A spurt of flame lit the landing below. A slug cut through my coat sleeve, slicing a piece out of my arm. For blind shooting, it was impressive. I fired back, flung myself down as Bat opened up. He fired three times, stopped.

I crawled towards the stairs, began to go down them head first, flat, pulling myself forward with my hands.

"You there, bub?" Bat called. "You won't get away this time."

The girl began to scream again.

"Oh, my back!" she gasped. "Bat! Help me. My back— it's broken. Help me, Bat."

I heard Bat curse her. I crawled on, the hair on the back of my neck bristling at the whimpering screams from the girl.

"Shaddap," Bat hissed at her. "I can't hear him with all this racket. Shaddap!"

"It's my back," she sobbed, screamed again.

Half-way down I crawled into the body of the man I had shot. I paused, touched him, tried to satisfy myself that he was dead. He didn't move as I pawed him over in the sticky darkness. I decided to crawl over him.

Bat said to the girl. "I'll finish you if you don't shaddap."

I was nearly on him now. He couldn't hear me because of the noise the girl was making.

I heard him curse. The girl suddenly stopped screaming.

"What are you doing?" she moaned. "Take that gun away. Bat!" Her voice shot up in a shrill note of terror.

A single crack of gunfire exploded close to me. There was silence.

I caught a glimpse of Bat as he moved, lifted my gun, fired. He must have seen my movement for he fired at the same time. His bullet ploughed a weal along my cheek. I watched him. He rose up, tottered back, his gun slipping out of his hand. I fired again. The slug socked into him, throwing him back. He fell down, stretched out.

I pulled out my electric torch. The beam lit up a nightmare scene. The girl lay on her side, bent back, half her face was shattered by the heavy bullet from Bat's gun. Bat lay near her, his hand touched her naked foot. Blood seeped out of him like water from over-boiled cabbage I turned him over. He moved, blinked his eyes, snarled at me.

"So long, Bat," I said, put the gun to his ear. Before I could squeeze the trigger, his eyes rolled back, fixed. I stood up.

My arm ached. Blood dripped down from my fingers, from my face on to my collar. My side hurt. I didn't care. It was over—finished. I could go back to Clair now and start afresh.

I walked to the front door, slid back the bolts, stepped into the night. I was still holding the Luger. I looked at it, wondering if I should get rid of it. Maybe I wouldn't need it again. Maybe I would. It was hard to believe that I was going to settle down. I had tried it for a few months and it hadn't worked. Well, I was going to try it again, but I was going to be prepared. Some wise guy might try to crowd me again, and I would be ready for him. I didn't know. I didn't care. Right now, I wanted to get back to Clair. The future, I decided, as I set off in the darkness, could take care of itself.

THE END